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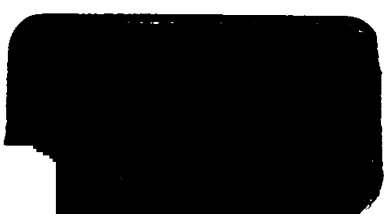
by

THOMAS COBB



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Mr. Passingham

DEC 29 1899
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MR. PASSINGHAM

An Episode in his Life

BY

THOMAS COBB

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Mr. Passingham

Chapter First

THE situation was capable of a sensational development, and Mr. Passingham, M.P., profoundly disliked anything of the kind. Partly from a desire to serve Lady Dewhurst, partly from an overweening confidence in his own diplomatic ability, he had rushed in where a discreet angel might well have feared to tread.

The encounter was due to the fact that Lord Dewhurst had fallen in love. Under Providence, Lady Dewhurst held herself to blame for this catastrophe. If she had abstained from urging her son to be present at a certain Fancy Fair at Albert Hall, in all

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probability he would never have met Zelie Trenchard.

Seeing Zelie, however, appeared to be synchronous with loving her. Though Lady Dewhurst perceived that something was amiss with Digby during the ensuing two months, she scarcely anticipated that he would possess the effrontery to ask her to call on Mrs. Trenchard!

"She lives near Regent's Park," he said, at the end of a long exordium.

"Who is she?" Lady Dewhurst demanded. "I have never heard of the woman. Does anybody know her?"

"I know her fairly well. I have seen a good deal of her —"

"Far too much, no doubt!"

"Mrs. Trenchard is a widow."

"Who was her husband?" asked Lady Dewhurst.

"I don't know. I could n't very well inquire. Besides, it does n't matter."

"Indeed, it does matter. I am astonished

you can ask me to have anything to do with such people, or have anything to do with them yourself."

"Zelie is a friend of the Fairbairns," Digby explained. "She was staying with them, and they brought her to the Albert Hall."

"A very poor recommendation," Lady Dewhurst retorted. "I sincerely hope you will have no more to do with her."

"I have asked Zelie to be my wife," said Digby.

Lady Dewhurst raised her shoulders, and threw out her hands with a gesture of helplessness. She was a woman with what is called "a presence": tall, with a large bust, and a handsome if somewhat inexpressive face. She was forty-seven years of age; Digby being twenty-five. He, too, was tall; an admirable specimen of his class: slender, broad-shouldered, with a small head, covered by closely cut fair hair, straight features, dark blue eyes, and a slight moustache, brushed away from his lips.

"It is only natural," he said, "that Zelie's mother should expect you to call upon her."

"Then," Lady Dewhurst returned, "she will certainly be disappointed."

A great deal more was said without carrying the affair any further; ultimately Digby left the room in a rare ill-humour. In her perplexity Lady Dewhurst did what she was very apt to do since her husband's death: she turned for assistance to Rowland Passingham; sent a letter requesting his presence in Hill Street, and into his ears poured her tale.

Rowland Passingham scarcely looked his forty-five years. Though his dark brown hair was becoming streaked with gray, his shaven face appeared entirely free from lines; a somewhat long, spare face, with eyes which showed a tendency to recede, and a prominent, well-modelled chin. He seemed always perfectly self-possessed and unruffled. He had preserved a youthful figure, weighing hardly half a stone heavier than he had done

twenty years ago. Almost as tall as Lord Dewhurst, his figure was flat and wide; he wore an unbuttoned gray frock-coat this afternoon, with a lily of the valley in his buttonhole; from top to toe, Rowland Passingham was always scrupulously "well-groomed."

There was a general expectation that, young as he was, he would attain Cabinet rank when next his party acceded to office; a consummation which would indisputably be due, to a large extent, to his efforts in the metropolitan constituencies.

A successful speaker, with unlimited confidence in himself, he possessed the happy ability to inspire a similar faith in other persons. He was very rich and had not married.

"You must not be alarmed if the boy sows a few oats," he said, when Lady Dewhurst paused.

"What I dread is his reaping the harvest," she returned. "Besides, Digby is not like other men. He has not a single vice. He

never caused me a moment's anxiety in his life, never until yesterday. Since then, I have not had a moment's peace — "

"Of course you have n't seen the young lady?"

"I have not the least intention to see her. Why should I see that kind of person?"

"Is her impecuniosity the chief objection?" asked Passingham.

"I object to everything," was the comprehensive answer. "I cannot say a word against the girl personally — "

"You wish you could!"

"It might make things easier. But she is simply a Nobody. Oh, the idea is too utterly ridiculous. Yet you know Digby's obstinacy; pray tell me what to do, Rowland."

"Have you tried remonstrance?"

"I have tried everything. I have argued, I have persuaded. I even shed tears and lost my temper."

"And he was still remorseless?" asked Passingham.

"He appeared deeply distressed, to do him justice. We have endured emotional scenes, but he keeps to his point. Surely it must be possible to do something. I wish I knew what to do!"

"Yes, yes," was the confident answer. "I wouldn't bother myself. I shall talk to the fellow."

The consequence of this interview was that Digby received an invitation to breakfast in Passingham's rooms in Victoria Street a few mornings later. At the end of the meal Passingham placed one of the drawers of his cigar cabinet at Dewhurst's elbow, and, lighting one of the small cigarettes of which he consumed an immense number, sank comfortably into one of the low, padded arm-chairs. Sliding down until the convenient attitude was reached, he crossed his long legs and emitted a smoke-ring.

"We are both men of the world," he began.

"Slaves to custom — the same thing."

"My dear fellow, you must be very far gone indeed."

"All the way, if you like."

"Still, one does n't shout about it. Let 's hark back to our — at least, to my — starting-point. We will try to discuss the affair as if we were men of the world. In the first place, your income is small — "

"There I'm with you," said Digby. "My income is infernally small."

"You have only one way to increase it, — a perfectly legitimate and laudable way, altogether agreeable. Youth, beauty, fortune at your beck! You have a head on your shoulders, at least you used to have: one remembers certain triumphs at the Union. You may lead your party; only you must first lead a rich woman to the altar. You want money; it is absolutely indispensable. The House of Commons being forbidden ground, you 're a nonentity without it; with it you may go far."

"Look here, Passingham," said Digby. "I 'm not a fool. I admit all you say; only—"

"Only—"

"Oh, you 're such a cold-blooded animal, it 's no use talking to you. I don't believe you ever cared for man, woman, or child in your life."

"My dear boy, why do you imagine I am wasting valuable moments this morning? If I took no interest in your career, I should n't try to prevent you from chucking it away."

"I intend to marry Miss Trenchard, anyhow," said Digby, with fine determination.

"You have her consent?"

"Oh, well, Mrs. Trenchard rather insists on my mother's recognition."

"Judicious person!"

"My mother will come round."

"Don't you know Lady Dewhurst better than that?" asked Passingham.

"If not before my marriage, then after."

"But if Mrs. Trenchard's consent depends — "

"That will be all right," said Dewhurst, confidently. "Look here, Passingham, I 'm not a child. I have a right to choose my own wife. I intend to exercise it; in fact, I have done so already. I have chosen, and there 's no valid objection — "

"Extremely valid, I should say."

"Ah, well. There 's the question of money; that is waived. Of Zelie I don't care to speak. Mrs. Trenchard is essentially a gentlewoman. I risk your sneer — a good woman, to boot. All I ask is that my mother shall see her — "

"In doing that Lady Dewhurst would commit herself; you see the Trenchards are not to be met in society."

"Confound society!"

"Your mother as well?"

"There 's the rub," exclaimed Digby. "Of course, you know it and trade on the

fact. I hate to cross my mother; but how miserably unjust to judge a girl without even seeing her!"

"We don't; we go on general principles. Grant she is the best of her sex, if you like, our objection still holds. It must be desirable to choose your wife from your own class; however numerous Miss Trenchard's virtues, you can't pretend she belongs to it. I appreciate your feelings, but, believe me, one easily gets over this kind of thing."

"I don't want to get over it, anyhow," said Digby; "and the wisest thing you can do all round is to induce my mother to call on Mrs. Trenchard."

This, however, would have proved entirely futile, even if Passingham had entertained such a desire. But he went to see Lady Dewhurst, and was constrained to admit that his talk to Digby had ended rather lamely.

"It is very hard," she cried plaintively. "I feel that it is making me ill. I get no

sleep. All I ask is that he shall marry some nice girl of his own class. Instead of that he has fallen into the hands of this wretched woman at Regent's Park."

"All sorts live at Regent's Park as elsewhere," was the answer. "After all, we don't know precisely what kind of woman she is."

"I set my face resolutely against such a marriage."

"Suppose Digby sets his face as resolutely the other way!"

"Of course, I know I am powerless!" Lady Dewhurst admitted. "But I cannot sit still without an effort to save him. You know how I value your advice. Pray tell me what I ought to do."

"That is rather difficult —"

"Ah, you don't realise the gravity of the situation."

"I think I do. I dwelt upon it at some length to Digby. At present we are quite in the dark. All you know is that the girl

has some kind of acquaintance with the Fairbairns."

"And that isn't a great recommendation! Of course, he declares she is very beautiful —"

"Otherwise, presumably, he would n't have lost his head," said Passingham.

"I grant a certain *soupçon* of refinement even — Digby would require that; but still —" She threw out her hands helplessly. "Someone," she added, a few moments later, "ought to see the people. Obviously I cannot. Now, my dear Rowland, you must go."

"Rather a large order!"

"You must go. We all know how clever you are. If you take a thing in hand, it is sure to be successful. If you go to Avenue Road, see Mrs. Trenchard, and tell her the truth about Digby's position and my —"

"She would probably turn me out of the house."

"No, no, she would never dare to do that.

When you have seen the girl, we may be able to form a better idea how to act. Rowland, I always count on you; I am sure you can't refuse me."

Ultimately, albeit not entirely without misgiving, Passingham assented; so that this request of Lady Dewhurst's led up to the embarrassing situation in which he was shortly to find himself.

Quite unsuspicious as to what lay in store for him, Passingham ordered his mail-phaeton for half-past three the following afternoon. He drove a pair of smart chestnut horses, with a dapper groom behind him, and sent them along the outer circle of Regent's Park at a dashing pace. Leaving the park by its north gate, he stopped at the house to which Lady Dewhurst had directed him: an ordinary semi-detached, suburban villa, not very large or pretentious, but admirably appointed as regarded window-blinds and curtains,—outward and visible signs of an income in excess of the occupant's bare necessities.

The sun shone full on the front of the house, its window-boxes were gay with scarlet geraniums and yellow calceolarias. The groom stood at the horses' heads, with one hand on the bright hook at the end of the pole, as Passingham alighted in his leisurely manner and, ascending the steps, rang the bell.

"Mrs. Trenchard?" he asked of the smart parlour-maid.

"What name, sir?"

"Mrs. Trenchard does not know my name. I wish for five minutes' conversation with her."

The servant glanced again at the visitor, and beyond him at the carriage.

"Will you walk this way, sir?"

He followed her to the drawing-room on the first floor.

"I will tell Mrs. Trenchard," she said.

A grand piano stood open by the right-hand window, and turning his back to this, Passingham took stock of the room. It ap-

peared to be furnished, not expensively, but with quiet good taste, and was evidently intended for use and comfort. In the fireplace was an arrangement of ferns; there was a profusion of flowers in every available space. A number of books and reviews lay about in pleasant disorder. Taking up a magazine, Passingham was leaning against the side of the piano, glancing down one of its pages, when the door opened. For once in his life, he was startled completely out of his self-possession. The magazine fell open, face downwards on the carpet. Passingham took a short step forward, a long unuttered name on his lips.

"Cecily!" he exclaimed.

Chapter Second

MRS. TRENCHARD was thirty-eight years of age. But nobody would have raised the question, — no man at least. Her experiences, whatever their nature, had left little mark upon her face. Its characteristic was an expression of supreme serenity, which is not to be associated with a lack of brightness or intelligence.

Her hair, put back in waves from a low forehead, had retained its lustre. Its colour was a very fair brown, yet not approximating to gold. Golden hair would have marred that unobtrusive quality which seemed to form part of her being. Her bluish-gray eyes still sparkled, her lips were healthily red; her serenity suggested self-repression and strength in reserve rather than listlessness.

Though her face possessed a remarkable charm, perhaps her chief attraction was her figure. Tall, above the average of her sex, she carried herself with a dignity which Lady Dewhurst herself could not hope to equal. Without being unduly developed, the contour of her bust approached perfection.

For a few moments she stood within the room, exhibiting various symptoms of extreme agitation. She, however, recovered her self-possession quickly. The pair still stood for some time at gaze. Then Passingham spoke first.

"It is a little suggestive of a scene from a play," he said, not without a trace of mockery in his voice. She was quick to adopt his tone.

"The dramatic moment at the end of an act. But I imagine it was entirely unrehearsed —"

"Absolutely extempore! I had no suspicion —"

"Of the pleasure in store for you," she

said, smiling faintly, though her eyes wore a mournful expression.

"Cecily!"

"Mrs. Trenchard, if you please."

"It seems impossible it can be twenty years — the more now I see your face."

"You think Time has used me more kindly than —"

"It has used you liberally. You are a very beautiful woman. It is a mere fancy, of course, but you look taller."

"You must remember I was not very old when you —"

He interrupted her hastily.

"Assuredly you have gained in dignity."

"And you in all kinds of honour." Perhaps there was a slight inflection of the word. "I have followed your career with interest. My husband was one of your staunchest supporters."

"I have no recollection —"

"You would not have. Won't you sit down? Of course I lost sight of you for a

time — as you doubtless intended. By-and-by the newspapers began to mention you. You became conspicuous for your good works."

"At least," he said, following her example and sitting down, "you have cultivated a pretty habit of sarcasm."

"Or are you more sensitive? You used not to be sensitive. As for that, I have tried to cultivate myself in every way."

"And admirably succeeded!"

"It would have been so easy to go under completely," she said quietly.

"Instead of which —"

"Oh, I married."

"Tell me all about yourself," he asked.

"There is little to tell. I had an idea I should never see you again —"

"I was called to Italy by my father's illness."

"Italy sounded a little vague, did it not? You gave me no more definite address. I could not write, even if I wished. Besides,

you would scarcely have left me all that money if you intended to return. As time wore on, suspicion became certainty."

"I did try to find you," Passingham returned. "But two years had passed —"

"Before that time I married Mr. Trenchard —"

"Yes?" he said, as she hesitated. "How long was that after I started?"

"About eighteen months. It was useless to attempt to obtain another situation as a governess since I had run away with you from the last."

"Your friends?" he suggested. "You told me your father had been a major in the Artillery."

"Yes, but he was dead. I had few friends — of course with the exception of you. I husbanded my resources. The money you left lasted till Mr. Trenchard asked me to marry him. I told him everything."

"You have lived happily?"

She shook her head very slightly.

"I don't complain. I suppose I was extremely fortunate. My husband was successful in his business. Oh, I have nothing to complain of. But though he condoned the past, he could not succeed in forgetting it. Then I had my child. Zelie made amends for much."

"Only the one?" asked Passingham.

"Only one survived. Zelie is seventeen. She will soon be eighteen. There was another; a boy who died in infancy. A terrible blow to my husband. You see it was an immense grief that there was no one to succeed to his business. On his death, about two years and a half ago, it passed to his partners, from whom I receive an annuity —"

"But Miss Trenchard?"

"Poor Zelie! My husband became soured by the loss of our boy. He seemed to take a dislike to the girl — it is difficult to dislike Zelie, too."

"Does she resemble her mother?"

"Not very closely. She is infinitely prettier than I was, even in my palmiest days — about the time I met you."

"Like her father?" asked Passingham.

She fixed her eyes on his face.

"Yes, I think she is. She has dark hair — not black, but a very dark brown. She is very tall; taller than I am. If she had not a superb figure, she might look too tall. Of course, I am naturally prejudiced. You must see her and judge for yourself. But I think you will admit that Zelie is the most charming girl in the world. Her features may not be classically regular, perhaps, but you must see her. Until about two years ago, she was at a boarding-school in Paris. Now she is the joy of my life."

"Then her father left her nothing?"

"Oh, yes. A hundred pounds a year after my death and until her marriage. Mr. Trenchard loved his business better than anything else in the world. So you see Zelie's face is her fortune, Mr. Passingham."

"Dewhurst repeated his visit?" Passingham suggested.

"A great many times. Finally he asked Zelie to be his wife — that was last week."

"I don't know whether you are aware that he is a poor man."

"Is he?"

"And that Lady Dewhurst sets her face dead against his marriage."

"So I am learning. I don't pretend that I anticipated anything else."

"You encouraged Dewhurst, nevertheless?"

"Encouragement has not been necessary," she retorted. "You might as well talk of encouraging a runaway horse. Still we won't quarrel about a word —"

"Oh, we won't quarrel about anything."

"I remember you never quarrel — you depart. However, I permit Lord Dewhurst's visits. I confess I like him, as I said —"

"And Miss Trenchard?"

"Ah, Zelie loves him."

"Yet they cannot very well marry," said Passingham.

"Why not? Lord Dewhurst is of an age to please himself. You will admit presently that Zelie is fit to be his wife. My chief desire in life — it is no empty phrase — is to secure her happiness. I think Lord Dewhurst will make her happy. Judged by our standard, he is by no means poor. I own to a little ambition — for Zelie's sake."

"Another thing," said Passingham; "when it comes to the point, Dewhurst is not the man to fly in his mother's face. The marriage would break her heart."

"Oh, hearts don't break! Once they are married, everything will come right. Zelie is not to be resisted."

"You were good enough to promise that I might see her."

"I should like you to see her."

Mrs. Trenchard rose, but Passingham intercepted her and rang the bell.

"Tell Miss Trenchard," she said, when the servant came. Then she looked at Passingham. "You came here to prevent what you regard as a mésalliance. Now you know who Zelie's mother is, you are more determined than ever."

"For God's sake, don't speak to me in that way," he cried.

"It is true. You cannot attempt to deny it. Before you saw Zelie's mother, the marriage appeared undesirable; now you think it would be utterly disastrous—"

"I must speak to you further—"

"That is Zelie's step," Mrs. Trenchard interrupted. "Of course we have never met before to-day."

"No doubt you wish we had not," he muttered; and the same moment Zelie entered the room.

Chapter Third

"MR. PASSINGHAM — my daughter Zelie," said Mrs. Trenchard. "She has just come home from her singing-lesson, the last remnant of her education."

"Mine is not completed yet, Miss Trenchard."

"Have you still something left to learn?" inquired Zelie's mother.

"The most difficult lessons begin when one's schooldays are over."

"Mother," cried Zelie, "I shall ask you to send me back again to Paris."

"I don't think I could spare you, Zelie. Mr. Passingham," Mrs. Trenchard added, "is a friend of Lord Dewhurst's."

"Digby did not tell me you were coming," said Zelie, turning towards the visitor.

"No? Well, I have stayed an unconscionable time, I am afraid. I am due at the House —"

"Oh," cried Zelie, "are you —"

She stopped abruptly.

"Am I what, Miss Trenchard?"

"I was going to say, are you *the* Mr. Passingham, only I thought it would be bad manners and just stopped in time."

"I suppose I may say I am *the* Mr. Passingham."

"I have read ever so many of your speeches," she said.

"An infliction, I fear. What a peculiar pastime for a young lady of your age!"

"My mother," Zelie explained, "makes me read to her. When I left Paris, she declared I had forgotten how to pronounce English. Now, is not that a libel, Mr. Passingham?"

"I am sure it is. But you have n't explained the selection of political speeches. Is it that mine keep the well of English undefiled?"

"You must explain, mother. You always ask for them."

"Oh," he answered, meeting Mrs. Trenchard's eyes for a moment, "of course that's another story. Mrs. Trenchard's interest in politics is quite comprehensible. Good afternoon, Miss Trenchard."

He shook hands with her mother, then went downstairs. She walked to the window, where she stood watching as he took his place in the phaeton and drove away.

"Delightful to drive horses like those," cried Zelie. "What does Mr. Passingham's visit imply, mother?"

"Sit down and let's talk about it, dear."

"Why did he come?" asked Zelie.

"To tell me of Lady Dewhurst's antagonism. That was the gist of it."

"He took a long time to tell you that. Don't you think it's too bad to object without seeing me?"

"Impossible to object afterwards, Zelie. But it is n't you, personally, she finds

fault with. She acts after her kind. Any woman in Lady Dewhurst's position would do the same. I foresaw it from the outset."

"And yet—"

"Yet I allowed Lord Dewhurst to come here? Yes. Because I believed and still believe everything will turn out happily."

"How can it, if his people are against me?" asked Zelie.

"Lord Dewhurst is old enough to judge for himself, dear."

"He is devoted to his mother."

"Or I should not like him so well as I do. But his devotion to you is a little obvious, too. If Lady Dewhurst was not aware of the weakness of her position, she would hardly have sent Mr. Passingham here to-day."

"I had an idea I should like Mr. Passingham," said Zelie. "Now I am beginning to hate him."

"Don't say that, darling."

"Why not? It is the only way I can retaliate. Not that I imagine that Mr. Passingham cares whether I hate him or not."

"I care, Zelie."

"Mother, dear," said Zelie, coming to her side, "you could n't hate anybody if you tried ever so hard. There 's nobody in all the world so good as you."

"I like you to think so," Mrs. Trenchard answered.

"If you had lived three or four hundred years ago, someone would have handed you down to posterity as a Madonna. You know, when I was a child, I always thought of you in that way."

"Now you have put away childish things."

"No, I have n't; though, of course, I 'm glad you did n't live in the sixteenth century —"

"Let us talk about this present year of grace, Zelie. Of course, Mr. Passingham employed various arguments to prove the un-

desirability of the affair. I assured him that when you were married, you were bound to make Lady Dewhurst love you —"

"I shall never be married unless she treats you properly, mother!" cried Zelie.

"Oh, I can tolerate anything for your happiness," said Mrs. Trenchard.

"Unless she treats me properly, then!"

"One usually has to sacrifice something. It is a commonplace, but you will find it a truth. There's no gold without alloy. Surely you will not object to sacrifice your pride to win the man you love."

"I don't want to win him, — not in that way, as if it were some competition."

"A great many girls would enter for it, Zelie."

"I am not one of them. Do you know, mother, I have an idea I ought rather to be won — very vain of me, is n't it?"

"You are well worth winning," said Mrs. Trenchard, "but we must take facts as we find them. Your future is in your own

hands, I am sure of that, — a splendid future, too. Of course, if you tell Lord Dewhurst what you have told me, there 's an end to it. Because it is n't at all likely his mother will ever consent."

"Then," said Zelie, "I shall never marry her son."

"Yet you have promised to marry him!"

"Yes, but there was no question about Lady Dewhurst's consent then. The idea did not occur to me. Digby asked me to be his wife and I took everything else for granted. I suppose it was foolish of me."

"But, Zelie, do you realise what you propose to do? Lord Dewhurst has become a part of your life. How will it be when you have driven him out of it?"

"Oh, of course, it will be very miserable —"

"And you have to do so little. Simply to keep your word and leave the rest to me."

"But, mother, how unlike you! I can't imagine you as an arch-plotter. Now,"

cried Zelie, "I have hurt you! Of course, I know you would not do it for yourself. But I hate your doing it for me, either. How humiliating!"

"To be Countess of Dewhurst, Zelie!"

The parlour-maid coming in with afternoon tea, the subject was dropped. Shortly afterwards Mrs. Trenchard left the room, and a little later a hansom drove up to the door, and Digby alighted.

Nobody would have imagined that the course of true love ran aught but smooth. Never looked a wooer more debonair and gay. Zelie held out her right hand somewhat stiffly, keeping herself aloof. When Digby leaned forward, she drew farther back.

"I must claim my prerogative," he said with a laugh.

"No," she retorted, "I think I shall issue a declaration of independence."

"I shall have to employ force," he cried; "I must treat you as a rebel."

She sat down by the window.

"We have had a visitor, Digby."

"Is that an unusual occurrence?"

"It is, rather. Nobody comes but you —"

"And to me you deny a welcome!"

"A distinguished visitor — guess!"

"Oh, I'm an awful duffer at riddles. Give it up," he said.

"Mr. Passingham!"

"Has he been here? How did he account for himself?"

"I can't tell you that. My mother received him alone. He stayed an enormous time, then I was summoned. You have never told me he was related to you."

"Well, the relationship is n't very close. Of course, my mother thinks no end of him. What did he say to you, Zelie?"

"Not much. I felt he was summing me up — it was only my idea. He was quite nice — only —"

"Only what, dear?"

"Digby, I think I have made a mistake!"

"How?" he demanded.

"Oh, you know how. In promising to be your wife."

"'Pon my word, I don't see where the mistake comes in."

"Your people think — well, they think I am not quite good enough for you."

"Yes, that's an immense mistake," he admitted. "If it were less ridiculous I should rave. You know, Zelie, a man was never in such a fix, but is n't it absurd to imagine I am not to choose for myself? Besides, it 's a day after the fair. I have chosen. My mother will come round —"

"Mr. Passingham says she won't."

"Very well. Then I shall go my own way —"

"I am afraid your way will not be mine," Zelie answered.

"Why not? What earthly reason —"

"Oh," she cried, "I don't pretend to reason about it. I feel that it is horrid. Unless I receive a welcome —"

"Darling, I shall welcome you. I hun-

ger for you to come to me. Now," he said, "the discussion stands adjourned."

"But what shall we gain by putting it off?"

"I always put off anything unpleasant. — Good afternoon," he exclaimed, rising as Mrs. Trenchard entered the room.

"I wanted to speak to you," she said. "Zelie!"

Zelie rose and left them.

"Zelie tells me Passingham has been here," Digby remarked, as he closed the door after her.

"I suppose I need not tell you why, Lord Dewhurst."

"No, that's hardly necessary. I think it's awful cheek, you know."

"His visit signifies I am not to receive one from Lady Dewhurst."

"I'm afraid it does."

"Of course," she said, "it is impossible to feel flattered. But I endeavour to make allowances, though I cannot permit Zelie to be trifled with."

"Heaven knows I'm not trifling — no man was ever more in earnest — "

"I believe that," she returned, "and I know it would spoil my daughter's life to part from you."

"Oh, come, Mrs. Trenchard, you must n't even hint at our parting."

"I am afraid I must do more than hint at it. I told you in the first place that I insisted on Lady Dewhurst's recognition. If your mother had thought it desirable to call upon me in the ordinary course, you and Zelie might have been affianced."

"We are."

"Oh, no. Indeed, that is not my view of the situation. Lady Dewhurst holds aloof; now, what course do you expect me to pursue?"

"I hoped you 'd just let things go on, don't you know — "

Mrs. Trenchard shook her head with an air of determination.

"I cannot do that, Lord Dewhurst. The

present vague condition might drag on for months, goodness knows with what result. I can't allow Zelie to continue in uncertainty. Unless you can assure me that Lady Dewhurst will come to see me within a week, your visits here must cease."

"I can't," he answered. "I wish I could. But you must n't forbid my visits; my chief desire in life is to make Zelie my wife —"

"Oh, I have no objection to that. I should rejoice to see my daughter Lady Dewhurst; that is only human. What I will not permit is this state of uncertainty. All your people are opposed. You might come backwards and forwards here for months, and break Zelie's heart at the end. If it were a question of immediate marriage —"

"I am prepared to marry Zelie next week, Mrs. Trenchard."

"That is your affair. Pray don't misunderstand me. I am not attempting to entrap you. Of course, that will be said, but I can

endure it. You must judge for yourself. But should you decide to marry Zelie immediately, I confess my chief objection would be removed."

"The difficulty is to remove Zelie's," he cried.

"In that," Mrs. Trenchard answered, "I am afraid I can't assist you."

Chapter Fourth

THE morning after his visit to Mrs. Trenchard Passingham sat down to breakfast somewhat later than usual. He had passed a disturbed night. His man placed the *Times* on an easel at his left hand, and quietly quitted the room.

Numerous pictures hung on the walls, chiefly landscapes by contemporary painters, with one or two photographs of the old masters. In various corners stood piles of blue books. The book-shelves, which ran completely round the lower portion of the room, were well filled. Amongst heavier works there were a great many poets, ancient and modern, together with a large number of novels and stories; some of these being of a more sentimental character than many of

Passingham's friends would have expected to see there.

He drank some tea, ate some toast, looked down the leading article, then leaning back in his chair appeared to fall into a reverie.

His alert-looking face appeared less equable than usual. There were dark patches beneath his eyes. He showed his age a little more plainly.

Presently, pushing back his chair, he took a gold case from his pocket and selected one of his small cigarettes. He was in the act of exhaling the first smoke-cloud, when the door opened.

"Lord Dewhurst, sir."

Without ceremony Digby brushed past the servant. He was clad in a suit of drab homespun, and threw his soft felt hat on to the nearest chair. Thrusting his cane beneath his arm, he began to unbutton his glove in a manner which betokened extreme excitement and contrasted strikingly with Passingham's unruffled demeanour.

"I want to know what the deuce —"

"Sit down, my dear fellow. Will you have some claret?"

"What the —"

"Or soda and whiskey?"

"What the deuce did you mean by going to Mrs. Trenchard's yesterday?"

"A cat may look at a king, you know," drawled Passingham. "I suppose there's no objection to my calling on Mrs. Trenchard —"

"Yes, there is, if —"

"Ah, well, you should have stuck up a notice. How was I to know? Better have a cigar!"

"I call it infernal impudence," said Digby.

"What?"

"You know — to hint that I could n't marry Miss Trenchard."

"Can you?" asked Passingham.

"In less than a month she will be my wife."

"When the fact is accomplished I will felicitate you. Come, you have vituperated me enough for one sitting. Only my admirable schooling enables me to bear it — and your youth."

"A man who is twenty years older than another always thinks he 's a hundred times as wise," quoth Digby.

"My dear fellow, it 's mere envy, believe me. Give me youth, and hang experience. Come, sit down, smoke and speak sensibly."

"You 're the coldest dev— "

"I beg your pardon," said Passingham, pushing the cigars towards him.

"The coldest beggar I ever knew," Digby growled, sitting down on one of the low padded chairs. "Now, look here, Passingham, you 've seen Mrs. Trenchard. What have you got to say against her?"

"She looks far too young to be her daughter's mother, that 's all."

"Can you pretend there 's any sufficient

reason why my mother should n't call on her?"

"Oh, well, that 's another story. Don't glare! You make me nervous, and it 's bad for one's digestion. As for Miss Trenchard —"

"I decline to discuss Miss Trenchard!"

"Very well. But I don't. A very charming girl. I am perfectly sincere and not unsympathetic. I commiserate you. Quite natural you should lose your head, only you 've got to recognise your limitations."

"Anyhow," cried Digby, "I 'll thank you not to go again —"

"Can't promise."

"What 's your game?" Digby demanded.

"To prevent you from making an ass of yourself."

"That 's no business of yours."

"No business of mine if I saw you try to jump out of window, but I might feel enough interest to pull you back. I went to Avenue Road at Lady Dewhurst's request, merely to explain her point of view."

"Mrs. Trenchard knew it already."

"My dear fellow, the secret of persuasion is judicious repetition."

"No need to go again, anyhow," Digby persisted.

"Not for the pleasure of seeing your friends!" said Passingham. "I have a duty to perform, — that's no reason why one should n't perform it amicably. Look at this morning's paper. You will see how Resborough slipped into me last night. This evening I dine with him. You young people take life too seriously. You should sip the honey and pass on."

Digby rose and took his hat.

"By the bye," said Passingham, "how is Lady Dewhurst this morning?"

"Oh, my mother 's all right."

"All right! She did n't look all right yesterday, far from it. Astonishing how she has aged the last week. Well, good-bye."

When Passingham arrived at Hill Street later in the day, he found Lady Dewhurst

eagerly expecting him. She offered both hands as he entered her drawing-room.

"How can I thank you?" she cried.

"I fancy Digby could tell you!"

"Poor boy! He is terribly put out. Of course that deepens my gratitude. Please tell me all about it."

"There's little to tell," he said, sitting down, "and that is commonplace. Mrs. Trenchard is the widow of a man of business who met with a certain measure of success —"

"Yet left his daughter no money!"

"It appears he was immensely disappointed at the death of his son, took a kind of dislike to the girl, and —"

"Absurd!" cried Lady Dewhurst. "Well, Rowland, and the girl herself?"

"Oh, a decent enough girl —"

"Is she really nice-looking?"

"More than nice-looking. She has charm; in what it consists, I really cannot tell you. It is certainly there."

"And the mother? Of course, Digby refuses to hear a word against either."

"I shall not speak one. Mrs. Trenchard is still a very beautiful woman —"

"Obviously clever."

"How is that?"

"She has made a convert. I suppose you are going to advise me to smile on Digby's project."

"No, no, I can't do that. Things being as they are, it would be disastrous. In a less artificial society, perhaps, he could hardly do better."

"How easily a woman can dupe even the wisest man!" cried Lady Dewhurst.

"I am absolutely impartial," he answered; "that is my strength. Never underrate the enemy. In fact, there was no attempt at deception. Mrs. Trenchard's candour was delightful —"

"Like everything else about her!"

"Perhaps. She admits her desire for the marriage, and insists that, once it is an accom-

plished fact, you can't hold out. Indeed, it is difficult to see how you can."

"It is not an accomplished fact yet!"

"Digby declares it shall be within a month. One wishes one lived in more primitive days. Take them in themselves: man and woman, they make a pair."

"A convert is always an enthusiast," said Lady Dewhurst.

"I admit a little enthusiasm. What would life be without it! I like the girl. There is a freshness about her, a rather uncommon *naïveté*. Yet she is no fool."

"Oh, I never imagined she was a fool, Rowland!" she said. "Well, you have gone over to the enemy."

"Not at all."

"You are half disposed to facilitate —"

"Oh dear, no!"

"Then I must confess I don't understand you!" said Lady Dewhurst, throwing out her hands helplessly.

"I suppose there's a tinge of romance in most of us."

"At forty — forty what is it?"

"To return to reality," he said, "of course it would never do."

"How to prevent it!"

"That I must think about —"

"I must do more than think about it," she returned. "I must act. I cannot understand the *ménage*. In all probability Mr. Trenchard never existed."

"You take the point of view of Betsy Prig on Mrs. Harris?"

"Why should he leave his widow amply provided for and his daughter nothing? I shall consult Dixon."

"One does n't see where a solicitor can come in," Passingham suggested.

"I suppose he can see the will, if there is one."

"There would not be. At all events, Mrs. Trenchard's money takes the form of an annuity from her husband's firm. Try

to be judicial, my dear Lady Dewhurst. If Miss Trenchard were an heiress, you would have no objection."

"She is n't an heiress and her mother is a miserable schemer."

"If you saw her—"

"I am a woman and should see clearly. I shall tell Dixon to make inquiries."

"If they are satisfactory, shall you relent?"

"Certainly not."

"Then what—"

"Digby must retain a spark of proper feeling. If I can convince him that Mrs. Trenchard has given a false account of herself—"

"There is not the remotest reason to suppose she has."

"Depend upon it, Mr. Trenchard is a myth," Lady Dewhurst persisted. "I am not prejudiced; no, I am not, but I hope I am not entirely destitute of common-sense. Convince Digby of the truth, what-

ever he does, he will never marry the girl."

Passingham frowned and bit his upper lip.

"I confess I don't care for the idea," he said presently.

"It can do no harm at the worst. If I am mistaken —"

"You certainly are."

"Well, then there's an end of it. I must do something. I can't sit still and see Digby ruin himself. Must you go?" she asked, as he rose offering his right hand.

"I am afraid so. I wish I could see you looking less harassed."

"It is worrying me into my coffin, Rowland. Then, of course, Digby will be able to please himself."

"You will have to send for Dr. Feversham," he said.

Chapter Fifth

REPEATING his visit to Avenue Road the following afternoon, Passingham found Zelie alone in the drawing-room. As the door opened, she rose and came towards it with an expectant smile on her face. He saw it fade as she recognised the visitor.

"Ah, it is a terrible disappointment," he said, holding her hand.

"I am very pleased to see you —"

"You did not look very pleased; but then pleasure, like everything else, is relative, is n't it? Confess to a little disappointment."

"I am sorry Mrs. Trenchard is not at home," said Zelie. "She won't be long— if you will wait."

"You are pleasantly situated," he remarked, sitting near one of the windows. "Have you lived here long?"

"Since my father's death. Until then we lived in Bedford Square."

"But you were at school —"

"Yes, in Paris. It seemed almost like my home. I used to spend all my holidays there —"

"You have changed all that now. Which do you prefer?"

"Oh, this, of course," she answered. "When I first came home, I scarcely seemed to know my mother. It was a revelation."

"You lead a quiet life?" he suggested.

"It is a little quiet. She does not care to go into society."

"How does Mrs. Trenchard kill time?" he asked.

"Would you really like me to tell you?"

"Very much indeed."

"In doing good," said Zelie, warmly. "She will take pity on people in the streets, quite horrid women, and bring them here and keep them for weeks, and even then never lose sight of them."

"Mrs. Trenchard does good by stealth —"

"Ah, you are laughing at me," cried Zelie; "but there is no one in the world like my mother!"

"How delightful to possess the capacity for hero-worship," Passingham exclaimed, "though it may be dangerous too."

"If one discriminates?"

"You are discreet beyond your years. They are not many, Miss Trenchard?"

"Almost eighteen," she said.

"What a fogy you make me feel!"

"Do I?" she asked. "You don't appear to me at all in that way. I had imagined some one much older."

"You had formed your ideal!"

"Oh, yes, because my mother so often —"

The door opened as she was speaking.

"Lord Dewhurst."

Digby frowned at Passingham as he approached Zelie, and before his greeting was finished, Mrs. Trenchard returned.

"Did you come with Lord Dewhurst?" she asked, turning to Passingham.

"No, I anticipated him; but the charm of Miss Trenchard's conversation —"

"Did you find something very engrossing to discuss?"

"Very."

"May one inquire —"

"Yourself."

"Oh, Zelie is far too enthusiastic."

"Very enthusiastic, it is true. She has been extolling your good works."

"How such a recital must have bored you! Did you feel disposed to go and do likewise?"

"Tell me what I shall do," he said, lowering his voice.

She glanced significantly at Zelie and Digby, who appeared to be engaged in an

interesting conversation. Passingham followed the direction of her eyes. Then he shook his head.

"I hoped —" she began, and stopped.

"What did you hope?"

"That a second visit might imply repentance."

"It does —"

"Oh, please spare me that!" she whispered. "Your first coming I could understand. This repetition seems a little supererogatory."

"With the best intentions one can't alter facts," he said.

"One can accept them. Is n't that one of life's great lessons? We kick against the pricks for a while, then bow and make the best of it."

"The oracle speaks," he said lightly.

"It is difficult to remember one's auditor. I ought to adapt my tone. You have not altered much."

"You are anything but complimentary.

However, you must let me come to see you again."

"Why?" she asked.

"It affords me pleasure; I have business to discuss as well. When may I see you alone?"

She hesitated a moment.

"To-morrow, at four," she said then.

A few minutes after Passingham's departure Mrs. Trenchard quitted the room.

"I can't help liking Mr. Passingham," cried Zelie.

"Oh," said Digby, "I like the fellow well enough, only he makes me tired. He won't mind his own business."

"He was very nice. I began to think —"

"What, Zelie?"

"It sounds too humiliating," she exclaimed. "I hoped this second visit signified that — that —"

"That my mother had come to her senses? I am afraid not."

"Still, if Mr. Passingham does not like us,

why does he come?" she demanded. "He seems to get along so excellently with my mother!"

"Passingham," said Digby, "is the kind of man who could shoot his enemy in cold blood and raise his hat when the funeral passed."

"I suppose he is very clever."

"Clever in watching how the cat jumps. You will observe he always has a following; yet he never leads. He finds out what people want, takes his cue, and dishes up their schemes for their own delectation. He calls it political sagacity! Then he is a manufacturer of phrases. He sums up their thoughts, calls in the aid of alliteration, and that 's how it 's done."

"Surely," said Zelie, "he tries to influence people in the way he thinks right."

"He might if he thought any one thing more right than another. He does n't trouble himself about what is lawful, only about what is expedient. He keeps an open mind,

and the first article of his creed is a belief in majorities. He always shouts with the larger crowd. Get a certain number of persons to believe a thing, Passingham becomes a convert. He deals out current coin so profusely that you are compelled to think he possesses a mint of his own."

Zelie smiled rather wistfully.

"What a pity I cannot get a majority on my side!" she said.

"It might influence Passingham; it would not affect my mother, I am afraid."

"It appears that nothing is capable of influencing Lady Dewhurst!" cried Zelie.

"Yes, there is one thing."

"What?" she asked.

"Our marriage, darling," he replied. "We have arrived at a deadlock. Now, obviously, someone must give way."

"I am not likely to give way, Digby."

"You would have Mrs. Trenchard's approval," he urged. "For the simple reason that she is convinced I shall make you happy."

"I do not doubt that, either," said Zelie, "but it is a matter I have to decide for myself. The responsibility can't be shifted."

"Still, darling, if you have to choose between an immediate marriage and an eternal good-bye."

"I am afraid I should have to say good-bye, Digby."

"Oh, don't let 's talk about it," he said.

Chapter Sixth

PASSINGHAM was not surprised to receive a visit from Lord Dewhurst the following morning. He was too well acquainted with Digby's impetuous disposition to suppose that he would not seize an early opportunity to relieve his mind concerning the second visit to Mrs. Trenchard. And the early morning was the only sure time to find Passingham free. He was a man of multitudinous engagements.

"Now," said Digby, when he had lighted a cigar, "I want to know what your little game is."

"My dear fellow, I am not playing a game."

"Why did you go to Avenue Road yesterday?" Digby demanded.

"Why did you go?"

"To see Zelie."

"So did I," said Passingham.

"My motive is patent to all the world," was the answer. "I make no mystery about it."

"Oh dear, no. You give yourself away. However, you don't seem to entertain much doubt about mine."

"What beats me is this!" Digby cried. "You go there, you see a girl like Zelie, act as though you were her friend; and all the time you're plotting against her happiness —"

"No, no, against her marriage. That is n't always the same thing."

"Shoddy cynicism!" cried Digby.

"Not at all. I am no cynic, merely a friend of your family. I think Zelie — forgive the familiarity — is as nice a girl as I know. I assure you I feel quite paternally towards her. But to hark back: a marriage such as you propose is bound to turn out

badly. It is n't a question of merit. A black woman might possess every virtue. But marry Miss Trenchard and you 'll curse your fate within a year."

"You make statements, you don't give reasons!"

"Who reasons with a man in your condition?" Passingham retorted. "But we waste time. If you are prepared to set your mother at defiance, she is not. A common or garden young lady might do so. I don't fancy she is of that order. You ought to know best."

"If she yields it will be under pressure."

"Which you think it justifiable to apply?"

Digby looked into Passingham's face and laughed outright.

"Saul amongst the prophets!" he said.

"Tending the ass, rather. However, we won't bandy compliments. You are annoyed with me. Not unnaturally —"

"Annoyance yields to astonishment," Digby retorted. "I thought you held ambition to justify anything."

"My dear boy, you make a mistake. You don't understand."

"I fail to discriminate between theory and practice; is that it, Passingham?"

"All young people fail to allow for the complexity of the highest organisms. I admire Miss Trenchard profoundly —"

"Yet you try to prevent my marriage!"

"Why, certainly."

"And in a beastly underhanded way."

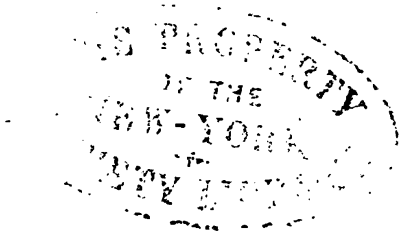
"Not at all. I am a kind of superficial transparency. I speak frankly both to you and to Mrs. Trenchard. Zelie I have not approached on the subject, nor shall I."

"You are going again, then?"

"To-day. I have an appointment at four."

"Confound you!" cried Digby. "I suppose that is why I received a hint not to go."

"Probably. I shall try to convince Mrs. Trenchard that the whole thing is injudicious. I think I shall succeed. If I fail, I shall still pin my faith to Zelie. However, to



strengthen my case, I shall look Lady Dewhurst up on the way. I am becoming a little anxious about your mother, Digby."

"Oh, she 'll be all right in a day or two."

"I wish I felt sure of it," was the significant answer.

She certainly appeared to be in a despondent mood when Passingham called on his way to Regent's Park. She was beginning to look considerably older; her eyelids were red as though from want of sleep; her cheeks looked white and flabby. Moreover her voice and gestures betrayed nervous excitement.

"I am very wretched," she said in answer to Passingham's inquiries. "I never had the slightest disagreement with Digby till now."

"We met at Avenue Road yesterday."

"So you went again — "

"As I told you I should do."

"I do not see the purpose," she exclaimed. "I don't understand you."

"My dear Lady Dewhurst, I don't understand myself."

"The only problem that is beyond you, I suppose!"

"Let us talk about Miss Trenchard," he said.

"To think that my son should think of marrying such a person!" Lady Dewhurst laughed discordantly. "A good girl! That is his phrase. What a queer attraction for a man!"

"Are n't you like a certain order of Christians," he asked, "who regard salvation as the privilege of only their own sect? But the fact remains, and, believe me, she holds Digby's fate in her hands."

"Heaven help him, then!"

"Possibly your petition may be granted," said Passingham.

She grew suddenly excited.

"You don't think Digby will listen to reason, after all!" she cried.

"He can't avoid bowing to necessity."

"Oh, pray don't bewilder me, Rowland."

"I have an idea that Miss Trenchard may decline to marry him in the face of your disapproval."

"You place extraordinary confidence in the girl!" she said contemptuously.

"Not without reason, I think."

"Yet you have seen her only twice."

"Once was sufficient," he said; and bidding Lady Dewhurst good-bye, he took the reins and drove swiftly towards the north-west.

"I am a little late," he said, as he entered Mrs. Trenchard's presence. "Did you give me up?"

"Oh, no, I did not give you up," she answered.

"You perceived that I was bound to come?"

"I thought you would come," she said. "Naturally, since you asked me for an appointment. Zelie has been sent out —"

"You treat her as a child?"

"In some ways; in others she is far from being a child. Zelie possesses a will of her own —"

"And an excellent opinion of her mother."

"That," said Mrs. Trenchard, "is at once my keenest joy and my eternal reproach. But I suppose you have something to say to me."

"You can guess what."

"I thought, perhaps, we had discussed the subject sufficiently," Mrs. Trenchard answered. "It is one we can hardly expect to agree about. You think the marriage would be detrimental; I, on the contrary, regard it as highly desirable."

"And your daughter herself?" he asked. "What does she think about it in the face of Lady Dewhurst's antagonism?"

"I admit that Zelie is difficult to deal with," was the answer. "My chicks have come home to roost. I have done my utmost to foster a sense of her own responsibility. I have tried to forewarn and to

forearm her as I was never forewarned. I have exalted the right of private judgment."

"So that now she refuses to be governed by your advice. To put it differently, she, against whom Lady Dewhurst declared war, has become her ally."

"At present, yes. But when it comes to the point, love will conquer them both."

"Then," said Passingham, "all your training has left her — "

"A woman still. God forbid it should not."

"And your daughter, Cecily."

"Don't, please — "

"At all events," he said, "though you have done your best to make her a reasoning creature, you hope she will be carried away by an impulse."

"On the whole, and things having gone so far, yes, I do. If the time had to come over again, — the last three months, I mean, — then I am not sure. I have gone too far to draw back. I have given Lord Dewhurst

a kind of tacit encouragement. I believe Zelie's life's happiness depends on him."

"Yet she does not appear to be a very lovelorn damsel."

"Ah, you don't know her. The pride which makes her hard to guide causes her to hide her feelings even from Lord Dewhurst. Though Zelie is the most unaffected girl in the world, hers is not a remarkably simple nature. She has," Mrs. Trenchard regarded Passingham with a peculiar expression, "depths which no one suspects. She will smile when the average young person will cry. They think she is heartless, but she is capable of a grand passion."

"And," asked Passingham, "does she follow her mother there?"

Mrs. Trenchard shook her head.

"Her father?"

"I think so."

"Mr. Trenchard —"

"Zelie's father," said Mrs. Trenchard,

warmly, "was not an ordinary man. He was capable of baseness. He gloried in a kind of callousness which he thought was affected, but was in reality part of his nature. Yet he had an alloy of — what shall I call it? — romance, sentiment, emotion, I cannot hit the word!"

"He had at least an acute critic," said Passingham.

She shrugged her shoulders slightly.

"He needed the occasion to bring his latent quality into play."

"Did it never arise?"

"Never," she answered rather bitterly, "within my experience. However, we were discussing Zelie. I fully intend —"

"To marry her to Lord Dewhurst; it is very obvious."

"I shudder to think of the alternative," she said.

"And you trust that your daughter's weakness may prove her salvation."

"I am afraid that is true."

"Another point," said Passingham, after a short pause. "I hate to hint at the danger, though it is a very lively one. Lady Dewhurst has instructed her solicitor to make inquiries — "

Mrs. Trenchard half rose, then sank back into her chair.

"You might have spared me that!" she exclaimed.

"I tried my utmost. Dixon is a shrewd man — "

"It has been my one gleam of happiness," she said, "my one consolation, — to stand well in Zelie's eyes. Offer me the choice between death and her enlightenment, I should not hesitate."

"Take my advice," he urged. "Give Dewhurst his *congé*."

"And break Zelie's heart."

"You say hearts do not break! Besides, you fear that of her own free-will she will dismiss him."

"It is a fear which I persuade myself is

groundless," she answered. "I tell you, I believe love will overrule her pride."

"In a few days Lady Dewhurst may learn what I dread as deeply as you do."

"You — what difference can it make to a man!" she cried.

"She will tell Dewhurst; that is her definite intention."

"You think he will visit the sin of the —" Pausing, she stared at him somewhat wildly. "Oh," she cried, rising now and walking excitedly towards the window, "it is merely a part of your plan to frighten me into acquiescence."

"Before God — no! I tried my utmost to dissuade her. But how can Dixon set to work without discovering — Take my advice, Cecily. Lady Dewhurst will tell her son; it may reach Zelie's ears, whether she marries Dewhurst or not —"

"So that she is happy!" Mrs. Trenchard exclaimed.

"Far better," he urged, "to follow my

advice and put an end to the affair at once."

"I must think about it," was the answer. "I must have time to think about it."

Chapter Seventh

"GOOD-NIGHT, mother."

Zelie bent over Mrs. Trenchard's chair at half-past ten that evening.

"Sit down a few minutes, dear; here on the stool by my side. Zelie, you have got to make up your mind."

"I have done that —"

"But seriously."

"Yes, mother, seriously."

"You still receive Lord Dewhurst —"

"Oh, I can't act inhospitably. If he comes, I can't send him away, can I?"

"You will have to send him away, my dear girl. You will have to send him away or consent to an immediate marriage. I shall insist on one thing or the other. I am

convinced that Lady Dewhurst will not countenance us —"

"Quel hauteur!" cried Zelie.

"Lord Dewhurst is very eager to marry you —"

"You know I won't agree to that," said Zelie.

"Why not?"

"Oh, need we go over it again, mother?"

"If a child won't learn her lesson, what is one to do?"

"Have n't I learnt it too thoroughly, the lesson you taught me? Was n't I to do right, and —"

"Be sure it is right, Zelie!"

"In moments of doubt, did n't you tell me the least pleasant course was usually the best?"

"A counsel of perfection, dear," said Mrs. Trenchard. "In a workaday world you are compelled to compromise. You have to think of Lord Dewhurst. Don't you think there may be something of self-

ishness in this scrupulosity? Surely a man has a right, an absolute right, to marry whom he pleases."

"If the case were reversed," Zelie suggested, "if it were you who objected —"

"You are a child, Zelie."

"A girl of eighteen is as old as a man of twenty-five," said Zelie. "I think I feel older than most girls of eighteen. Suppose I wished to marry a man you objected to, should I be justified?"

"It is no use arguing as if a man and a woman stood on the same footing, dear. They don't."

"Oh, but that is an outworn doctrine!" cried Zelie. "We are emancipated now, you know."

Mrs. Trenchard shook her head.

"We never shall be till we cease to be women," she answered. "Nature has handicapped us, Zelie. You gave Lord Dewhurst your promise."

"But at that time I never dreamed Lady

Dewhurst would withhold the light of her countenance —"

"She can't withhold it after your marriage. And, my dear girl, you surely have n't the heart to send him away. It will be irrevocable, you know."

"I think I have," said Zelie.

"Don't you fall into a little confusion?" asked her mother. "Don't you confound duty and pride?"

"Perhaps I do. All I know is that whenever I think of Lady Dewhurst my whole spirit revolts."

"You have the power of retaliation."

"I would not stoop —"

"Not to conquer, dear?"

"I simply ignore her —"

"Exactly what you are asked to do! And once you send him away, he will never come again. Good-night, Zelie; but, oh, think well of what you are going to do!"

To make amends for his absence to-day,

Digby was to come to Avenue Road to-morrow morning. On his arrival he was shown to the drawing-room, where he found Mrs. Trenchard alone.

"You received another visit from Passingham yesterday," he said. "I am afraid you are having an awful lot of bother —"

"It will soon cease," she returned. "The matter has to be decided to-day. There must be a limit, — as well to-day as any other day."

"Have you spoken to Zelie?" he asked eagerly.

"Yes, I have spoken to her. She is apparently averse from acting in opposition to Lady Dewhurst. However, it is quite possible you may succeed where I have failed. If you sit down, I will send her to you."

Digby stood watching the door with a rueful countenance till, about five minutes later, Zelie entered the room.

"Zelie," he cried, as he took her hand,

leading her to a chair, "I wish I knew how to hypnotise you."

"Why?" she asked quietly.

"If I could only subdue your will to mine—"

"I don't think I am clever at being subdued, Digby."

"Wives, submit yourselves to your husbands!" he cried.

"I am not a wife."

"I want you to become my wife, Zelie. You have confessed your love. After confession the penance, you know."

"It is absolution I want," she said.

"Confess once more, darling!"

"I love you, Digby."

"And you will be my wife very soon, Zelie?"

"If—"

"Without an if—unconditionally and at once. As soon as things can be arranged. You know what a miserable fix I am in. You know how obstinate my mother is—"

"I am obstinate, too."

"But she is impotent, you are not. She can't spoil my life, you can."

"That is what they say I should do, is n't it?" asked Zelie.

"I wish to heaven she would smile upon us; but as she won't — why, a wilful woman must have her way."

"I must have my way, Digby."

"But, dearest, once we are married, my mother will —"

"Oh, of course, she would have to make the best of me, to tolerate me because she could n't help herself. Think of the humiliation of it!"

"Zelie," he pleaded, "don't you love me well enough to endure this one indignity — I can promise you it shall be the last."

"For anything but that —"

"What can I do?" he demanded. "I am willing — eager to do all I can —

"I cannot see there is anything to be done," she murmured.

"You are not going to send me away!"

"I am afraid I must."

She rose, and for a few moments they stood silent. Then, as though the strain were too intolerable to be longer endured, Zelie held out her right hand. Disregarding this, he placed his arms about the girl's body, and kissed her eyes and lips. As he pressed her closer and closer to himself, she began to return his caress. She clasped her hands behind his neck, as though, since the time for parting had come, she could only cling to him.

Now Dewhurst seized the psychological moment. Raising his arms, he gently unclasped her fingers.

"Good-bye, Zelie," he said, and stepped backwards towards the door. She followed him with her arms extended.

"Digby, don't — don't leave me!" she cried.

He was by her side again.

"Darling, unless you will become my wife at once, I must go."

"Give me till to-morrow," she said. "I did n't know what it was —"

"Will you try to come to me, Zelie?"

"Yes — I will try," she said.

Then Digby went away, and when Mrs. Trenchard entered the room, a quarter of an hour later, she saw Zelie lying prone on the sofa.

"Tears!" she exclaimed. "You are not unhappy, Zelie?"

"Only ashamed, mother."

"Lord Dewhurst said he was to come again to-morrow morning, dear?"

"Yes —"

"What does that imply?" asked Mrs. Trenchard.

"That I am a coward. You were right. You knew me better than I knew myself. I had not the courage to let him go."

"Then you have really decided!"

"I cannot decide, and yet —"

"Yes, dear, and yet —"

"Oh, mother, darling, I can't give him up. I hate and despise myself—"

"Hush, hush, Zelie!"

"I do. I hate and despise myself for giving way. Lady Dewhurst cannot despise me more."

"There is no shirking it, Zelie. You must either marry him or dismiss him."

"I can't dismiss him, mother. I am humiliating myself. I can't help it. I—I did n't know—"

Mrs. Trenchard leaned over the sofa and kissed her.

Chapter Eighth

THAT afternoon Passingham received an urgent summons to Hill Street, and on obeying it, instead of being taken to the drawing-room as usual, was asked to enter Lady Dewhurst's boudoir.

She rose from a recumbent position on the sofa as he entered, and he could not but be struck by her worsened appearance. The teagown which she wore did not suit her ample proportions, and she had the look of a woman whose toilette had been hurriedly accomplished.

"Pray don't rise," he said. "I need not ask whether you are well. I can see you are not."

"No," she replied; "I have been feeling far from well. In fact, I was spending the

day in bed. I got up expressly because Digby asked to see me. Have you heard this awful news?"

"I have heard nothing."

"We have had the most heart-breaking scene, and really I was not fit to endure it. It appears that Mrs. Trenchard issued a kind of ultimatum. A clever woman! She threatened to end his visits — a mere ruse, of course. Digby is a child in her hands. Rather than cease to go to the house, he proposed an immediate marriage —"

"Has Miss Trenchard consented?" asked Passingham, quickly.

"Of course. To forge his bonds more securely, she holds him off till to-morrow. But there — I happen to know he has gone to buy the wretched girl a ring. It was impossible not to feel sorry for him. Of course he sees I am being driven into my grave. It cuts him to the heart, yet his infatuation is complete. He assures me I shall be reconciled after his marriage, as if I

would not do anything in the world to hinder it. What can I do! Unfortunately Dixon is ill and has had to leave London. I sent a message to his office this morning. He is expected home, so I may see him at any moment. That is my only hope now."

"A very poor one, I am afraid," he said. "Now let us consider what is the best to be done."

"You don't regard the affair as I do," she complained.

"I regard such a marriage as utterly suicidal, anyhow. I confess I counted on Miss Trenchard to defeat what was obviously Digby's purpose. One does n't care to be beaten. We have set ourselves to prevent the marriage. Perhaps we can —"

"If you would only tell me how!"

"Will you place yourself in my hands?" he asked.

"How willingly! You know I have the most perfect confidence in you. In you and the result of Dixon's inquiries —"

"You must not see Dixon!" said Passingham, quickly.

"Not see my solicitor?"

"No, no. You are far from well. I am sure you were not in a fit condition to leave your bed. I want you to return to it directly I leave you. You will probably pass a bad night —"

"There is not much likelihood I shall sleep with this hanging over me!" cried Lady Dewhurst.

"I am sure there is n't. And if you don't, you ought to ask Digby to send for Feversham directly after breakfast."

They sat regarding each other in silence for a short time.

"Then," said Passingham, "Digby will be able to hear what Feversham has to say before he starts to Avenue Road. I understood you to say that Miss Trenchard was holding him off till to-morrow."

"I am afraid he is too infatuated to let anything stand in his way, Rowland."

"Leave that to me — to me and Feversham," answered Passingham, as he rose.

"How good you are! How can I ever thank you!"

"Of course you will see nobody, not even Dixon."

"But —"

"You can leave instructions that he shall make his report to me."

"What a lot of trouble I am giving you!"

"Not at all. Now, I am sure that you are better alone."

She pressed his hand warmly, and Passingham at once returned to Victoria Street. A quarter of an hour after his arrival he pressed the electric bell.

"Take this letter to Harpole Street," he said, "and wait for an answer. Better have a cab."

His man soon returned with a message to the effect that Dr. Feversham would see Mr. Passingham at six o'clock, and punctually at the appointed hour Rowland entered the consulting-room.

Dr. Feversham had brought Lord Dewhurst into the world, and attended his mother professionally ever since. He was a man of average height, and somewhat stoutly built. His face was rubicund, and might have belonged to a prosperous farmer. He wore a pair of old-fashioned side-whiskers which, like his rather long hair, were snowily white. He had a pleasant, persuasive voice and a suave manner.

"No," said Passingham, in answer to his inquiry, "I am never ill, you know. I take too excellent care of myself. I suppose half your patients eat too much or drink too much."

"Seven eighths of them, and the remainder were anticipated by previous generations. I hope Lady Dewhurst is quite well?"

"Far from well, I am sorry to say." Passingham glanced round the room. "This must have been the scene of many a confidence," he said.

"Yes, it is a kind of confessional in its way."

"What I am about to say is under the seal, if you please."

"That is of course."

"The fact is, Lady Dewhurst is in a great state of agitation about her son. Dewhurst has become entangled with a woman. The worst of it is, he intends marriage. Oh, it is a clear case for medical treatment."

Dr. Feversham smiled.

"I am afraid — "

"I know you are not an alienist. You may imagine the effect on Lady Dewhurst. She is in bed, and will no doubt ask you to see her early to-morrow morning."

"I am always at Lady Dewhurst's service."

"You will think I am trespassing if I attempt a diagnosis. But I saw her a few hours ago — "

"I understood — "

"She left her room to speak to me about this unhappy marriage. A crisis has arrived.

It is to take place immediately. If it does, the effect on Lady Dewhurst can't fail to be disastrous."

"Is the woman —"

Passingham shook his head significantly.

"It would be utter ruin," he said. "Still, unless you can help us —"

"What," asked Dr. Feversham, "do you wish me to do?"

"If it were pointed out to Dewhurst that his mother's life is in peril, that nothing but perfect relief of mind could save it," said Passingham, "that, if anything, would surely give him pause."

Dr. Feversham crossed his legs and pressed his finger-tips together.

"I shall ascertain what Lady Dewhurst's condition actually is," he replied.

"You will be shocked at the change in her. She looks an old woman. The only cause is this infatuation of Dewhurst's. I feel confident she will never recover from the blow. You would be conferring an immense favour on Dewhurst himself."

"I have no objection to strain a point," said Dr. Feversham; "at the same time — "

"A very slight strain! All I have told you is undoubtedly the fact."

"You will excuse me, Passingham, but would it not have been wise to let me see Lady Dewhurst to-day?"

"Oh, undoubtedly. It would have been wise to send for you a week ago. I had some difficulty to induce her to promise you should be summoned if she were no better to-morrow. If Dewhurst marry this woman, his mother will never be the same again. It will shorten her days. She cannot sleep. She declares it is killing her. An interview with Dewhurst — an accent here — an accent there; you see the object is the boy's salvation."

"Well," said Dr. Feversham, as Passingham rose, "I have no doubt Lady Dewhurst will confide her troubles to me, she usually does so; and if I can assist you, I will."

Chapter Ninth

DR. FEVERSHAM was duly summoned to Hill Street the following morning. He found Lady Dewhurst in a worse condition than he anticipated. Her anxiety for the success of Passingham's scheme facilitated its accomplishment. She had not closed her eyes all night; her temperature had risen; she looked, as Passingham had said, an old woman.

If Dr. Feversham had not been prepared by Passingham, he could not have failed to discern that his patient was suffering from mental pressure of some kind. As it was, he sat down beside the bed, and in that paternal manner for which he was renowned, asked a number of judicious questions. The result was that Lady Dewhurst showed symptoms of hysteria, and opened her heart to the

man who had seen her son before her own eyes were satisfied.

She declared that his marriage would break her heart. She insisted, with natural but somewhat cruel prejudice, and far more forcibly than Passingham had done, on the unworthiness of Zelie, painting the consequences to Digby in the most vivid and alarming colours.

In the end Dr. Feversham promised to write a prescription and to see her again the same afternoon. Then he asked for Lord Dewhurst.

"I am afraid I can give you only a bad account of my patient," he said.

"I 'm awfully sorry."

"She is in a very serious neurotic condition," Dr. Feversham continued. "Her pulse is extremely feeble. I feel a little anxious —"

"You don't mean to tell me she — she is in danger!" Digby exclaimed.

Dr. Feversham slightly lifted his shoulders.

"I cannot say she 's not in danger, Lord Dewhurst. I don't intend to suggest that she will die to-day or to-morrow; but if your mother's condition does not improve, if it becomes aggravated, then I fear —"

"Surely her illness will yield to treatment?"

"Drugs are not of much avail in a case of this kind."

"Change of air —"

"Certainly, by-and-by. But first of all we must restore her strength, and there a difficulty arises. She cannot sleep. Now, sleep is most essential. She appears to be extremely worried and anxious. Unless the cause of her anxiety is removed, I am really afraid —"

Dr. Feversham tapped his knee with his double eye-glasses, and looked deprecatingly at Digby. For a few moments Digby lowered his eyes. Then he looked up with his characteristic expression of candour.

"I suppose," he said, "Lady Dewhurst has told you —"

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"You know the adage: From your doctor and your lawyer disguise nothing."

"I 'll swear she has given a prejudiced —"

"If Lady Dewhurst's objection to the course you contemplate were entirely illusory, the effect would be the same. I regard the matter merely as her physician. She tells me you contemplate an immediate marriage to a certain — er — young lady to whom she has an intense antipathy."

"Whom she has never seen."

"That is of no consequence. She has conceived this antipathy, and brooded over it for days. She can think of nothing else. She is haunted by the fear of your marriage. Remove this fear, she will no doubt recover; fail to remove it —" Again Dr. Feversham lifted his shoulders.

"You place me in a difficult position," said Digby. "My marriage is practically arranged to take place immediately."

"I am afraid you will gain a wife and lose a mother, Lord Dewhurst."

"My mother is cruelly prejudiced," Digby continued warmly. "As I tell you, she has not seen the young lady. I am asked to break faith with the woman I love, to sacrifice her happiness and my own, and if I refuse I am told I shall kill my mother! No man was ever confronted with such an alternative before!"

"Nothing is new under the sun, Lord Dewhurst. Certainly men have had to relinquish cherished hopes before. Don't think me unsympathetic if I remind you that my duty is merely to state the case. Naturally, I desire my patient's welfare, but that does not rest with me. I repeat what I have said already. Remove the cause of Lady Dewhurst's excitement, she will rapidly recover; if not —"

Leaning forward across the table, Dr. Feversham took a pen from the stand and began to write a prescription.

"Merely a mild sedative," he said; "the actual remedy is with you." Then he offered his hand and went away.

Looking at his watch, Digby saw that it was a quarter-past eleven. Going upstairs slowly and heavily, he tapped at the door of Lady Dewhurst's room, and receiving permission entered.

He could not fail to perceive that she looked exceedingly ill. Her face, too, showed traces of tears.

"Feversham has left a prescription," he said. "I hope you will soon be better. I will leave it at Bell's on my way —"

"Ah," she murmured, "you are going to those dreadful people."

"Mother," he said, "you make me feel like a confounded brute; and yet, if you would only —"

"It will soon kill me," answered Lady Dewhurst, "and then you can please yourself."

"Do you think it is quite fair to speak to me in that way?" he asked, stooping over the bed.

"It is the truth," she retorted. "I have

lain awake all night thinking about you. I am not exaggerating; I feel that it is killing me."

He stood looking down at her a long time without speech, then presently stooped again, kissing her forehead.

"You will be better by-and-by," he said.

"Better! How can I be better? I shall lie here with my head on fire, knowing where you have gone —"

"I can't help going this morning," he muttered.

She drew a deep sigh, as he left the room, and turned her face to the window. Hearing the street door close a few minutes later, Lady Dewhurst sat up in bed and rang a bell which stood at her side.

"Parsons," she said, when her maid appeared, "bring me the newspapers."

Digby drove to the chemist's, thence through Regent's Park to Avenue Road. His arms rested on the cab door, and his face

looked utterly dejected. In his waistcoat pocket was the ring purchased yesterday.

As the cab drove up to Mrs. Trenchard's door, he saw Zelie's face at the drawing-room window. Never had it looked quite so radiant. She smiled down bewitchingly upon him as he alighted, and he knew she was his own.

When he entered the room, Zelie came to meet him, but stopped half-way to the door.

"Well, Zelie?" he asked gravely.

"Well, Digby!"

Their eyes met, and, suddenly uttering an exclamation, he put his arms around her, straining her almost roughly to himself.

"You did not wait to ask for my decision," she remonstrated.

"I read it in your face, darling."

"Then why do you look so solemn? I never saw such a grave, serious face. You seem almost sorry."

Inserting his forefinger and thumb in his waistcoat pocket, he brought forth the ring.

"I was compelled to guess the size, Zelie."

"How sure you made!"

"The event justifies me, you see."

She held forth her left hand.

"You must put it on, Digby," she said. "Are n't you well?" she added, as he held her hand and placed the ring on her finger.

"Oh, I'm all right, Zelie."

"Not very pleased!"

He smiled a little feebly, and Mrs. Trenchard entered the room in her unflurried, graceful manner, offering Digby her hand. She looked very satisfied and happy, nor did she stint her admiration for the ring. But from time to time, as the three stood in a group, she glanced at Dewhurst.

"Is anything the matter?" Mrs. Trenchard asked presently.

"The matter —"

"Have you bad news?"

She looked inquiringly into his flushed face, and Zelie, asserting her new prerogative, rested a hand on his arm.

"I am sure there is something," she said.

"Oh, it is only that my mother is not very well —"

Zelie dropped her hand.

"Nothing serious, I hope," remarked Mrs. Trenchard.

"I am afraid — the doctor says she is in danger —"

"Oh, Digby, I am so sorry!"

"Who is your doctor?" asked Mrs. Trenchard.

"Feversham — Harpole Street."

"Have you had a second opinion?"

"No. We have perfect confidence in Feversham. He has attended my mother for years, and knows her constitution down to the ground."

"What is the matter with Lady Dewhurst?"

Digby was silent.

"Digby," said Zelie, "what is it?" There seemed a certain hardness in her tone.

"Oh, she seems to be suffering from sleeplessness and —"

"But," asked Mrs. Trenchard, "is that likely to prove serious?"

Again Digby was silent. Zelie spoke, however.

"Digby," she said, "I want you to tell me about it."

Mrs. Trenchard stepped towards the door.

"Mother, please don't go," Zelie cried; "I want you to stay."

Digby looked perplexedly from one face to the other, as Zelie stood trifling with the ring which he had just placed on her finger.

"Is it the prospect of our marriage that has made Lady Dewhurst ill?" she demanded. "Oh," she cried, "be frank with me, my dear!"

"I am afraid — she had not been herself for some days. She did not come downstairs yesterday, she could not sleep last night. This morning Feversham was sent for —"

"Yes, Digby?"

"It seems so utterly ridiculous," he blurted out. "If she would only consent to see you!"

"What did Dr. Feversham say?" asked Zelie.

"He spoke rather seriously. He said she was in a bad way."

"Because of the prospect of our marriage?"

Mrs. Trenchard observed that Zelie was trying to draw the ring over her knuckle.

Digby faced her helplessly.

"Oh, Zelie," he cried, "what can I say to you?"

"Tell me the truth. But, indeed," she continued, "it is not necessary. I know — I can see it so plainly. It is the idea of our marriage — Digby, did Dr. Feversham say she was actually in danger of her life?"

He glanced, as though for aid, to Mrs. Trenchard.

"Oh," cried Zelie, "answer me, Digby."

"Yes —"

"And that if — if you satisfied her wishes, she would recover. Did Dr. Feversham tell you that?"

"Yes, Zelie."

She was holding the ring in her right hand now.

"But," Digby cried, "everything is exaggerated —"

"Do you believe that Dr. Feversham's fears are exaggerated?" Zelie demanded.

"I am afraid not. He does not usually make the worst of things. But if we can ease her mind for the present —"

"For always," said Zelie, and held forth the ring. "You must take it, please," she added, as he drew back.

"Mrs. Trenchard," he cried, "for God's sake, tell me what to do!"

"I wish I could, Lord Dewhurst."

"An invalid is like a child," he urged. "It is necessary to humour her. If I can only satisfy her mind for the present —"

"And risk going through all this again

later on!" said Mrs. Trenchard. "No, I think once is enough in a lifetime."

"But —"

"The only question in my mind is whether Dr. Feversham's opinion is correct. If you honestly believe he is right —"

"I wish I could say I don't, Mrs. Trenchard."

"Then you can't expect Zelie to keep her troth at the risk of Lady Dewhurst's life. Lord Dewhurst, I have been eager — perhaps too eager — to see Zelie your wife; but even I cannot advocate your marriage at such a risk."

"If it is postponed," he urged, "I could come again —"

Mrs. Trenchard looked at Zelie. She saw that the girl was making a valiant effort to maintain appearances. Every particle of colour had left her cheeks. Her face was pale to the lips; her dark eyes seemed to sink farther into their sockets.

"No," she said. "You must not come

again. I have been wrong. I felt what was right; I had not courage to do it." She drew nearer to him. "Please go away now Digby!"

After staring at her blankly a few moments, he took her right hand in his. With his left he pushed back the hair from her forehead and kissed it. Without another word he walked to the door, but before leaving the room, he turned to see Zelie lying senseless in her mother's arms.

"Ring the bell!" cried Mrs. Trenchard.

He darted to the fireplace, then stopped to look at Zelie's blanched face.

"Can't I do anything?" he pleaded.

"Only go," said Mrs. Trenchard. As the servant entered the room, he quitted it.

Chapter Tenth

LORD DEWHURST walked slowly along the Avenue Road towards North Gate, and across Regent's Park in the direction of home. His face looked grave and stern, like that of a man from whom inexorable fate had extorted some immense sacrifice.

On reaching Hill Street, he admitted himself into the house and, going straight to his own den, took a briar-root pipe from a rack, filled and lighted it.

The luncheon gong sounded, and, as he took no notice, the butler came to his room.

"I have lunched!" exclaimed Digby, sharply, and slowly filled another pipe.

When this was smoked out, he laid it aside, and walking to the dining-room helped

himself to a glass of sherry. Then, ascending the staircase, he tapped at the door of Lady Dewhurst's room.

"Is it you, Digby?" she asked.

"Yes —"

"You may come in."

The blinds were drawn down, and the room was almost dark.

"I have been trying to get some sleep," said Lady Dewhurst, fretfully.

"Do you feel a little better?" he inquired.

But she looked worse than when he parted from her a few hours earlier. Her face was flushed. Her eyelids were swollen and half-closed.

"I am not likely to feel better," she answered. "How could any woman feel better knowing that her son —"

"Are you well enough for me to stay a few minutes?"

She darted a swift glance at his face.

"Have you anything to tell me?" she cried.

"I wish to heaven I had n't —"

"You have come to your senses. You have broken with those wretched —"

"I can't stand abuse," he said.

"Have you given the girl up?" she demanded. "If you can only tell me that —"

"No," he returned; "I could n't give her up."

Lady Dewhurst moaned.

"Zelie has given me up," he said gloomily.

"Thank God," answered his mother.

Leaving the bedside, Digby began to pace back and forth the large room. Presently, finding Lady Dewhurst's manifestations of satisfaction intolerable, he opened the door and went downstairs. The house seemed as melancholy as a deserted barrack. After wandering idly from one room to another for an hour, he set forth to Pall Mall. During the past two months his customary haunts had seen little of him. He could not rest at the club to-day, and soon retraced his

steps. After a solitary dinner at Hill Street, he ordered a hansom and drove to a music-hall; but the first turn disgusted him, and he paced the streets until a late hour.

About eleven o'clock the next morning, he was crossing the hall as a footman opened the street door. Recognising Passsingham's voice, he stopped.

"Ah, Dewhurst," cried the visitor, "I am rather an early bird. The fact is, I heard a rumour last night that Lady Dewhurst was n't so well. How is she this morning?"

"She has had a better night. Come in, Passingham."

"I have n't many minutes to spare. I've got to meet the whips at twelve —"

Digby took forcible possession of his hat.

"Never mind. Come in."

He led the way to his own den, and opened the door.

"Sit down and smoke," he said, taking down a pipe, while Passingham lighted a

cigarette. "I am so beastly wretched," cried Digby.

"Is n't the course of true love running on greased wheels?"

Digby stood with his right hand gripping the mantelpiece.

"What 's up?" asked Passingham.

"My mother was awfully seedy yesterday —"

"Has she seen Feversham?"

"Sent for him early yesterday morning. He took my breath away. Said she was in danger —"

"Sorry to hear that," said Passingham, gravely. "What is the matter — any specific disease?"

"Oh, she told him about Zelie —"

"But, my dear fellow, one does n't quite see the connection between Miss Trenchard and Lady Dewhurst's illness."

"Feversham seemed to see it, anyhow."

"Oh, well, one respects authority. Feversham ought to know his trade."

"He said my mother was in a bad way," Digby exclaimed, "and that it was all through her worry about my affair, don't you know. If the cause of her anxiety was n't removed, he refused to answer for the consequences."

"Of course," said Passingham. "I knew she was n't up to the mark. In fact, I tried to persuade her to send for Feversham some days ago, and I more than guessed what was upsetting her; but I had not the slightest suspicion it was half so serious —"

"Neither had I."

"It lands you on the horns of a dilemma," said Passingham.

"What surprises me," cried Digby, "is that I should be idiot enough to want to talk to you about it."

"Any port in a storm, I suppose."

"Any friendly port."

"My dear fellow, I am no enemy. You might as reasonably call your adversary at chess your enemy. You use big words."

"That's you down to the ground," said Digby. "You don't seem to realise that it's a matter of life or death — "

"Ah, you all think that. You're like a nervous person with a cut finger. To vary the figure, it's a disease peculiar to youth. Few escape it — "

"Were you ever attacked?"

"Never mind me. My youth is a thing long past. This disease never leaves a mark. The mortality is nil. The only misfortune is that one attack does n't protect against another, though the first is generally the most severe. However, tell me the rest!"

"I was never in such a fix," said Digby. "I went upstairs and saw my mother. I felt like a brute when I looked at her. But I could n't play the villain with Zelie — "

"You could hardly indulge in matricide, either. Yes, it was, no doubt, a perplexing situation."

"You see, to make it worse, if anything could make it worse, Mrs. Trenchard had been laying down the law. She was quite in the right. She objected to things dragging on indefinitely, and the long and the short of it was, I suggested we should be married at once —"

"Good man! That was definite enough."

"Zelie would n't hear of that," Digby continued. "She refused point blank. Then, just as I was going away, she veered round —"

"Like a woman!"

"I was to go yesterday to hear her final decision — not that I had much doubt."

"Did you see Feversham before you started?" asked Passingham.

"Yes, — he came before eleven. My appointment with Zelie was for noon. Imagine my position, — bound to hurt one or the other —"

"You know the story," said Passingham. "A man can get him another wife, but not

another mother. Besides, Miss Trenchard has youth on her side."

"Hardly an inducement to give her up! As a fact, I could n't bring myself to give her up. Heaven knows what I should have done! Anyhow, I drove to Avenue Road. She was at the window — looking for me. By Jove, Passingham, you never saw a girl's face look so — "

"I can easily believe it."

"I saw I was all right before I entered the house. When she came to meet me, I clean forgot about home affairs — "

"Rather unnatural of you in the circumstances! "

"Think so? If you had seen Zelie you 'd have thought it natural enough. Anyhow, I had only one idea just then. I had brought a ring, and she held out her hand while I put it on. Then a frost fell upon me. I began to wonder what I should say to Feversham — I suppose I looked fit to hang myself, that 's about

how I felt. Mrs. Trenchard put one or two questions — "

"And an ingenuous youth like you was compelled to answer truthfully."

"I was n't going to lie about it, anyhow. By Jove, you should have seen the change in Zelie's face. I shall never forget it. That girl loves me, Passingham!"

"I understood you always took that for granted," said Passingham.

"It 's an infernal business. Nothing else would have made me give way. It seems like Fate, hang it! You should have seen how plucky she was. But she could n't — she could n't keep it up. As soon as my back was turned, she swooned — "

"Oh, a swoon is nothing, — agreeable oblivion."

"I see her white face now — "

"My dear fellow, you 'll have to get away."

"I don't care a rap what I do!" cried Digby.

"Anyway, of course you won't go to Avenue Road again!"

"I don't suppose they would admit me. No, it's about settled now. Unless I can convert my mother."

"Her scepticism is too pronounced."

"You might —"

"No, no, you overrate my influence. Besides, you know my opinion."

"I ought to."

"What you've got to do," said Passingham, "is to make the best of it, like a sensible fellow."

"After all," exclaimed Digby, "the whole thing is so paltry. What is the root of my mother's objection? You know, as well as I do, it is merely a matter of money. If Zelie had a fortune, everything else might slide."

"By the bye," asked Passingham, "do you happen to know whether Dixon has been here?"

Digby shook his head.

"Why?"

"Only that Lady Dewhurst asked me to see him for her."

"Oh, I can see him if he comes —"

"I don't fancy that will do. She asked me; so if he should come, better have him forwarded. When is Lady Dewhurst likely to get away?"

"Goodness knows!"

"Of course you will go with her?"

"I suppose we shall go down to Hampshire," was the answer. "What are you going to do?"

"My yacht's under orders. Norway, most likely."

"Soon?"

"I must wait till the end of the session. Besides, I've a heap of engagements —"

"I wish I had," cried Digby. "Anything to kill time! I don't even know how she is —"

"Oh, she'll be all right. You'll remember me to Lady Dewhurst."

"Shall I give her your congratulations?"

Passingham rested a hand on Digby's shoulder. "At the present moment all my sympathy is with you — and Miss Trenchard."

"Yet you —"

"A surgeon may sympathise with the patient he hopes to save," said Passingham.

"Would n't it rather hamper his work?"

"At all events," said Passingham, "you 're not idiotic enough to blame me because you 're the sport of circumstances. As you said just now, it 's the finger of Fate. Believe me, I am sorry for you —"

"It requires faith."

"Because I don't wear my heart on my sleeve."

"Oh, you might," said Digby; "it would n't be noticed."

Chapter Eleventh

PASSINGHAM did not see Lady Dewhurst for several days. He called frequently to inquire after her health, but more than a week went by and she had not left her room.

During that week he made a journey to her solicitor's office in Ely Place, without seeing Dixon, however. He was becoming an old man, and suffered from a chronic disease which necessitated frequent visits to drink the waters at Contrexeville. But at least Passingham convinced himself that Dixon had kept the knowledge of Lady Dewhurst's commission a secret.

It was about ten days after Dewhurst's parting from Zelie Trenchard, that Passingham had to be present at the laying of a foundation stone of a new public "Institu-

tion" in the neighbourhood of Forest Hill. He made a speech and, the ceremony over, took a train to Victoria Station.

Alighting with a stream of passengers, he passed through the booking-office and was on the point of leaving the terminus, when a four-wheeled cab drove up with a considerable quantity of luggage atop. In the occupant of the cab he recognised Mrs. Trenchard.

As he lifted his hat, she hastily put forth a gloved hand to turn the door-handle, showing an obvious desire to alight before it was too late to intercept him.

"Let me open it for you," he said, coming to her aid, and, opening the door of the cab, assisted her to the pavement. It was only now that he saw Zelie.

She lay back within the cab, and when he turned from Mrs. Trenchard, rose from the seat with evident difficulty. She steadied herself for a few moments, then, supported by her mother on one side, and Passingham

on the other, stepped feebly forth from the cab.

"Can I be of any assistance to you?" he asked. "Will you allow me to take your tickets?"

"If you would not mind looking after Zelie," said Mrs. Trenchard, "I will get the tickets and see about the luggage."

He offered his arm, and Zelie placed her right hand upon it. Passingham led her across the crowded pavement in front of the station, to the door of the booking-office.

"I am afraid I cannot walk very fast," she said, leaning rather heavily on his arm.

He looked down at her face as he led her more slowly towards the platform. There were a great many intending passengers, and the way was frequently blocked. It seemed almost inconceivable that this immense change could have occurred in a short time. On the previous occasions of their meeting, Zelie had been radiant with health and young life. Little more than a week had

gone over her head, and she looked like a confirmed invalid.

Her face was the shadow of its former self, her cheeks and lips looked colourless, and yet there seemed to be a kind of pitiful winsomeness about the girl which required a very hard heart to resist.

"You have been ill?" Passingham asked.

"Oh," she returned, "I hardly know what has happened to me. They say I have been ill, so I suppose I have been."

"Are you better?"

"Would you mind finding me a seat?" she asked.

With some difficulty he found space on a bench for her to sit down. A number of laden trucks stood close at hand; a porter labelling one trunk after another to their owners' obvious relief of mind. To these Mrs. Trenchard's luggage was soon added.

"It is all done!" she exclaimed, after glancing about to discover Zelie. "I have

seen the trunks labelled and taken the tickets — "

"You will have a warm journey."

"That is why I left it so late in the afternoon," she answered.

"May I ask where you are going to?"

"St. Leonard's," she said, and bent towards Zelie. "Are you very tired, dear?"

"Just a wee bit, mother."

"I am afraid you must make one more effort; it is not a great one. We ought to be taking our places. Are you in a hurry, Mr. Passingham?"

"You know," he said, "I never am in a hurry. That 's why I am able to get through so much work."

"Will you help Zelie to the train?"

He offered his arm again, and with Mrs. Trenchard at her other side, Zelie passed through the gate and along the platform to the train. They found an empty first-class compartment, and with extreme care helped her in. After whispering a few words to

her daughter, Mrs. Trenchard walked half a dozen paces from the door towards Passingham, who was buying magazines from a boy with a basket.

"Are these for Zelie?" she asked, as he offered his purchases.

"They may beguile your journey."

"It is not a very long one — that was one reason why I chose St. Leonard's."

"I am afraid Miss Trenchard is far from well," said Passingham.

"Oh, if one had to suffer," was the answer, "I suppose it ought to be Zelie."

"I don't understand — "

"You have surely seen Lord Dewhurst?"

"Yes, but — "

"He must have told you. The object would not be attained if he had not told you. It seems that either Lady Dewhurst was to suffer or Zelie!"

"I hope this is not the result of — "

She gazed steadily into his face. Her own looked slightly thinner from ceaseless anxiety.

"Do you care?" she demanded. "Do you — are you capable of caring for anything or anybody?"

"You have had experience!"

"Ah, yes, I have had experience. Did you imagine that such a girl as Zelie could be treated as she has been treated without paying the penalty?"

"Who is to blame?" he asked.

"You imply that I am —"

"I think it was a little rash to encourage Dewhurst, the world being what it is. I don't think any one else has treated you less than well."

"I am not sure," she replied. "I can't make up my mind. All I know is that I may lose my darling! Yet she has no actual disease. You have seen a flower wither for want of light and sunshine —"

"But so quickly?"

"The fairest flowers fade the soonest. You know what Zelie was, you see what she is. She is not fit for this journey. But

all our surroundings at home served only to remind her. She prayed to be taken away, as I believe she prays to die. The doctor said change might do her good —"

She stopped, as it was necessary to make room for a heavily laden barrow. Passengers were continually passing and repassing.

"Have you a good doctor?" asked Passingham.

"One of the best. I had not required one since my husband's death. I sent for Dr. Feversham."

Passingham looked surprised.

"Is n't it time you took your seat?" he asked.

"There are five minutes yet," she answered. "I thought I could not do better than send for Dr. Feversham, since he was attending Lady Dewhurst. I suppose you think well of him."

"Oh, Feversham 's a good man — none better."

"I asked him whether he knew you."

"He has known me for years —"

"So he said. Like everybody who knows you, he admires! I suppose I must go now," she said. "I am very glad we met. I have been wishing you could see Zelie."

"I wish my seeing her would do any good," he answered.

"Do you know why I desired you to see her?" demanded Mrs. Trenchard.

"It is useless to make a complimentary speech," he said.

"Because I can't make up my mind whether you are responsible —"

"I —"

"Yes; because I can't decide whether it is you who have wrecked her life or not. God knows — and you. If you want to learn the details concerning Zelie, you can inquire of Dr. Feversham. I determined he should see the girl of whom Lady Dewhurst stood in dread! Ask his opinion. It is very likely I shall lose her. If I do, and you have had a hand in it —"

"But —"

"If Lady Dewhurst's illness is merely a fraud to deceive Zelie and separate her from the man she loved, your punishment will be so awful that I shall pity you —"

"Any more going on?" shouted the guard. "Seats, please."

Turning away with the magazines which Passingham had provided in her hands, Mrs. Trenchard entered the compartment where Zelie lay on a seat. The guard slammed its door. The train started, and Passingham raised his hat. Mrs. Trenchard beamed and smiled at the window.

Chapter Twelfth

As Passingham alighted from a hansom at Lady Dewhurst's door the morning after his encounter with Mrs. Trenchard at Victoria Station, a carriage drawn by a pair of bay horses made way for it, and, as the door was opened and he entered the hall, Dr. Feversham happened to be on the point of leaving the house.

The two men had not met since Passingham's visit to Harpole Street; as he now offered his hand, Dr. Feversham held his hat and bowed a little distantly.

"A sweltering morning," said Passingham. "It makes one quite long to get away."

"I have been wishing for the opportunity of five minutes' conversation with you," was the answer.

"I daresay we can find it here." Passingham turned to the footman. "Is the library empty?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Shall we go there, Feversham?"

Dr. Feversham nodded, and followed the servant to the room. As the man closed the door, he placed his hat in a rather deliberate manner on the table, while Passingham leaned against a bookcase.

"I hope you are satisfied with the improvement in Lady Dewhurst," he said.

"She is considerably better. A week has done wonders for her —"

"And your skill."

"Humph! I found Lady Dewhurst in a very agitated condition. The cause of her agitation removed, she began at once to mend. She has just been speaking of you in the most flattering terms —"

"Oh, one is always pleased to serve Lady Dewhurst."

"You must forgive my saying I cannot

feel equally grateful to you, Passingham." Dr. Feversham folded his hands behind him.

"By the bye," said Passingham, hastily, "I happened to run across another patient of yours yesterday."

"Who was that?"

"Miss Trenchard."

"Ah! a far more serious case, I am afraid."

"She certainly looked rather delicate," said Passingham, calmly. "But I hope that change of air and scene —"

Dr. Feversham shook his head.

"If I do not hear of an improvement, I shall go to see her. I gave Mrs. Trenchard a letter to a first-rate man at St. Leonard's, Dr. Brodrick, a former pupil of my own. You must excuse my saying it, Passingham, but I was distinctly misled."

"Not by me, surely!"

"By you, and I am afraid I must say by Lady Dewhurst also. In her case I am will-

ing to put it down to prejudice. Now, you have few prejudices."

"Not many, I hope."

"Ah, well, there are worse things. They're honest, anyway. Yes, I was distinctly misled. I remember your phrase perfectly. Lord Dewhurst, you said, had got entangled with some woman."

"There was nothing misleading there —"

"The implication did not accord with facts," said Dr. Feversham. "Whether it was a mere coincidence or a design which made Miss Trenchard my patient, of course I cannot say. But Mrs. Trenchard spoke plainly concerning the cause of her daughter's illness, and I confess I was astonished."

"Surely you don't regard Miss Trenchard as a suitable wife for Dewhurst. You can't fail to be aware of the condition of his estates. His father left them mortgaged up to the hilt, and Miss Trenchard is practically penniless."

"Yes, yes, she may be a suitable wife for

Lord Dewhurst or she may not," Dr. Feversham returned. "That was no affair of mine. What I wish to say is this. Even granting her unsuitability, the case was not sufficiently serious to justify the — er — somewhat drastic measures which you certainly induced me to employ."

"If I unwittingly misled you, I am sorry, Feversham."

"Hearing Lady Dewhurst's account of the affair on the top of yours," the doctor continued, "led me to think the woman was — er — really — you understand me. I certainly never imagined a young lady of Miss Trenchard's type. Of course, all that I said was strictly in accordance with facts — but I should have said it differently. Lady Dewhurst had been agitating herself; this had made her ill. If the cause had not been removed, she would indubitably have become worse. In fact, it was no exaggeration to say it would have tended to shorten her life. But under the impression that I was render-

ing everybody concerned an important service —"

"As you have done."

"Under that impression I, perhaps, coloured my report a little highly. The result is that Lady Dewhurst is practically herself again, but that a very charming young lady — as far as I can judge — is in a very serious, I might almost say, a critical condition. In fact, Passingham, to put the matter plainly, real life has, not for the first time, stolen an incident from fiction. Though founded on fact, I am afraid it was a fiction. What was made to appear true concerning Lady Dewhurst is most undoubtedly true of Miss Trenchard."

"If that is the case, I am sorry to hear it," said Passingham, "more sorry than I can express; but men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love, you know."

"I wish I could regard the matter so lightly. I envy your facility. It is impossible to tell how the case may turn —"

"You don't seriously fear the girl's death!"

Dr. Feversham slightly lifted his shoulders.

"There are conditions worse than death," he answered. "Whatever happens, you must excuse my saying, will lie at your door."

Dr. Feversham looked at Passingham expressively as he spoke, then walked abruptly towards the door. As he was about to turn the handle, it opened and Digby appeared on the threshold, accompanied by a short, stout, gray-haired man of about sixty years of age. This was Mr. Dixon, for many years the Dewhursts' family lawyer; of late, however, he was disposed to take his profession easily.

"I did n't know anybody was here," cried Digby. "My mother is not worse?" he added eagerly.

"No, no. Lady Dewhurst is almost herself again. Good morning, Lord Dewhurst."

Dr. Feversham left the room as Passingham shook hands with Dixon.

"I am afraid Lady Dewhurst won't be

able to see you this morning," said Digby. "But if I shall do —"

The solicitor eyed him curiously.

"I am afraid you will not do, Lord Dewhurst. What a very charming morning —"

"Lady Dewhurst has been expecting you," said Passingham; "she asked me to see you on her behalf."

Mr. Dixon looked considerably relieved.

"Ah, I ought to have been here a week ago," he replied. "I have had a severe attack of my old complaint. The doctor insisted on a visit to Contrexeville, and I only returned yesterday."

As he ceased speaking, he looked at Digby and coughed significantly.

"You want me to clear out?" Digby suggested.

"Well —"

"Oh, all right!"

A little hastily he walked to the door and quitted the room.

"Lord Dewhurst is not looking quite up

to the mark, Mr. Passingham," remarked Dixon.

"You think he is n't? I suppose you wished to see Lady Dewhurst about certain inquiries she asked you to make."

"You appear to be acquainted —"

"About a Mrs. Trenchard," said Passingham. "I understand all about it."

"Just so. Lady Dewhurst asked me to institute inquiries concerning Mrs. Trenchard's antecedents. A little out of our line, Mr. Passingham, just a little. However, Lady Dewhurst is an old and valued client — for anybody else —"

"Were your efforts successful?" Passingham asked. Clenching his left hand, he rested it on the table as he stood facing Dixon.

"To a certain degree. Lady Dewhurst appeared to think Mrs. Trenchard had no right to the name."

"She hinted at something of the sort."

"A little prejudiced, shall we say?"

"A little, perhaps."

"Perfectly natural in the circumstances. But there was nothing in it. Quite a mistake. I simply placed the matter in the hands of a private detective. I can furnish dates and full particulars, if necessary —"

"Results are sufficient," said Passingham.

"My agent has examined the Register. A Miss Cecily Edington was certainly married to a Mr. Adolphus Trenchard —"

"I never entertained the slightest doubt on the subject," said Passingham.

"There is one fact that may be of interest —"

"What is that?"

"Though the register contains an entry of the birth of a boy — Adolphus, after his father — he died fourteen months later — there is no registration of the birth of a girl —"

"She was the elder —"

"Oh, yes, I understood Lady Dewhurst to say there was a daughter about eighteen."

"Yes, that is so."

Passingham's voice sounded dry and harsh.

"Then," said Dixon, "if that is the case, she was born previous to Mrs. Trenchard's marriage, Mr. Passingham."

"That would make her more than eighteen years of age."

Rowland shifted his position as he spoke. His stick-up collar seemed to be uncomfortable. He inserted a finger between it and his neck.

"Yes; she must at least be going on for twenty."

"After all," suggested Passingham, "this is the merest surmise."

"True, sir, and it is this part of the investigation which has caused all the trouble and taken up so much time. My agent spared no pains to discover something bearing on Mrs. Trenchard's prenuptial history. Though Lady Dewhurst was wrong in a sense, this might have served her purpose — "

"No doubt," said Passingham, in the

tone of a man whose thoughts were far away.

"But," Dixon continued, "our efforts were not successful. Mrs. Trenchard's past remains a sealed book. Still I am willing to pledge my reputation that her daughter was —"

"Would n't that be a little rash, Dixon?"

"Not at all. If a daughter had been born after her marriage, in all probability the birth would have been registered. Now, I need not point out that, in the other case, registration would be by no means certain. Personally, I have no doubt whatever. I don't think it is much use to carry the investigation farther —"

"No, no." Something in Passingham's voice caused Dixon to look quickly up into his face. "I am sure Lady Dewhurst would not wish it. You are aware of her motive?"

"Certainly," was the answer. "To prevent a most disastrous —"

"There is no longer any necessity to prevent it. Lord Dewhurst has given up all idea of the marriage."

"I am sure I am sincerely pleased to hear it, Mr. Passingham."

"And in the circumstances I am confident you will best meet Lady Dewhurst's wishes by never referring to the subject again. You understand that one will use any stick to beat a dog —"

"I confess it was rather dirty work."

"I shall tell Lady Dewhurst what you have told me —"

"Thank you."

"And there's an end to it," said Passingham.

Mr. Dixon stepped towards the door.

"Are you going away soon?" he asked.

"At the end of the session —"

"A very protracted session, Mr. Passingham, and you have done yeoman's service. The chief burden of opposition seems to fall on your shoulders."

"I think I can bear it," said Passingham, solemnly.

Mr. Dixon shook his head. He took a deep interest in the various phases of ill-health.

"You are not looking well, sir. A bad colour, if you will excuse me. There is a colour about your skin which I don't like. But you were consulting Dr. Feversham! We cannot afford to overwork our willing horses —"

Passingham opened the door.

"Good morning, Mr. Passingham."

"Ah — good morning, Dixon, good morning."

Then the solicitor left the room, and Passingham closed the door. He stood holding the handle and gazing blankly before him. After a few minutes he walked to a chair and sat down, resting his elbows on the table, his forehead on his hands. Of the flight of time he was perfectly oblivious. How long he sat there, Passingham never knew. The clock ticked monotonously, the sunlight

shifted its position on the Turkey carpet; still he remained motionless, with his head in his hands.

Presently the door opened in a manner which bore witness that the intruder was Dewhurst. Passingham raised his head.

"By Jove, what's up?" cried Digby, stopping at the opposite end of the table.

"Nothing that I'm aware of."

Passingham slowly rose.

"You don't seem very steady on your pins. Let me give you a peg."

"No, thanks. I'm all right."

"A man who's all right hasn't your figure-head, Passingham."

"I must be getting along —"

"My mother wants to see you."

"Is she up?"

"In her boudoir. I happened to let out that Dixon was here, and she said you were to be sure not to go without seeing her. Will you come up?"

"All right, I'll follow you."

"It would not have been remarkably important at any time," he explained. "In short, all he has discovered goes to corroborate Mrs. Trenchard's own account of herself."

"The wretched woman was married, then?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Well, as you say, it is of no consequence now."

"I explained to Dixon that your interest in the matter was dead," said Passingham; "and, in fact, I hinted that he would do well to forget it had ever existed."

"Always considerate, Rowland!"

"I must be going —"

"Already? You have only just come. It seems such an age since I saw you. And how much has happened! To think that a fortnight ago Digby was still entangled by those awful people, as he would be even now, if it were not for you —"

"Yes, I suppose he might."

"You know I told you at the first that

everything you undertook succeeded. You are immensely clever, Rowland."

"I am afraid I must say good-bye, now."

She took his hand, looking affectionately into his face.

"Good-bye. I can never, never thank you enough. I shall always be grateful. But I trust I shall soon see you looking better. Good-bye, Rowland. You will come to see me on your return."

He released his hand and quitted the room. Going downstairs without meeting Digby, he got outside the house.

That evening Passingham travelled to St. Leonard's, and from the railway station drove to an hotel in Marine Parade. Asking for a local Directory, he looked up the name of Dr. Brodrick, to whom he remembered that Feversham had given Mrs. Trenchard a letter of introduction, and from Dr. Brodrick he succeeded without the least difficulty in obtaining Mrs. Trenchard's address.

Chapter Thirteenth

THE windows of Mrs. Trenchard's lodging-house sitting-room commanded a wide view of the English Channel. By one of them a sofa had been wheeled, and at half-past ten o'clock on the morning after Passingham's arrival at St. Leonard's, Zelie lay upon it gazing out upon the sea.

At the table in the middle of the room, her mother sat, from time to time looking up from the newspaper and casting anxious glances at the girl.

Presently the door opened and the landlady entered, carrying in one hand a large basket of flowers covered with tissue paper, in the other hand a letter.

"Is that for me?" asked Mrs. Trenchard.

"Yes, m'm, as were brought by a young man from the Alexandra Hotel."

Taking the letter, Mrs. Trenchard looked at its superscription.

"I don't know the writing," she said, as the landlady quitted the room. "Zelie," she added, "the flowers are for you."

"Are they?"

Her tone was listless, and she did not turn her head.

"Don't you want to look at them, dear?"

"If you like, mother."

Mrs. Trenchard brought the basket and the letter to the window, and, sitting down on the edge of the sofa, began to remove the tissue paper covering. Then she held the flowers close to Zelie's face.

"What lovely roses!" the girl exclaimed.

"Sweet, are n't they?"

"Who sent them, mother?"

"Perhaps the letter will tell us."

"Is there a letter?" asked Zelie, holding forth her right hand. It looked very white and thin.

"The letter's for me, Zelie. Oh,"

cried Mrs. Trenchard, directly she unfolded the note, "from Mr. Passingham!"

"He didn't say he was coming to St. Leonard's, did he, mother?"

"No, darling."

"It was rather nice of him to send the roses. I think Mr. Passingham is nice, don't you?"

"Handsome is as handsome does!" said Mrs. Trenchard. "Oh, yes, I think he is."

"What does he say?" Zelie inquired.

"He hopes you are better, and says he intends to call at twelve o'clock. I don't think I shall let you see him."

"I don't want to see anybody."

At half-past eleven Mrs. Trenchard took Zelie upstairs to the bedroom.

"You won't think of getting up till you see me," she insisted.

"Oh, I should n't mind if I never got up again!"

"Nonsense, nonsense!" whispered Mrs. Trenchard, bending over her; then going to

the dressing-table, she spent a few minutes over her toilette.

"How sweet you look!" said Zelie, as her mother turned from the looking-glass. "Light colours suit you infinitely better than dark. Nobody would believe you had a daughter of eighteen. Perhaps you won't have her long —"

"Zelie, Zelie, how melancholy!"

"I feel melancholy," was the answer. "I don't seem capable of anything else. I lie awake at night thinking how miserable I am, and I get up in the morning dreading each new day."

"You will be brighter in a little while, darling!"

Zelie turned her head on the pillow.

"No," she said, "and I don't even feel that I care to be. I don't care for anything."

Mrs. Trenchard kissed her forehead, and went to the sitting-room, which was underneath that which she had just left. Leaning

forward as she sat down by the window, she covered her face with her hands. Then sitting upright again, she threw back her head with a decided gesture and awaited her visitor.

As the clock struck twelve, she heard his step on the stairs. The next moment he was coming towards her, hat and stick in hand. In his homespun suit his figure looked more slender and youthful than it did in London, but his face bore unmistakable signs of a sleepless night. Instead of offering his hand, he stopped two yards from her chair.

"It is a pleasure I did not anticipate," she said.

"Nor I," he answered.

"Zelie was pleased with your flowers — as pleased as she is capable of being — "

He interrupted her brusquely.

"At the time — when I met you the day before yesterday at Victoria — your last words were a puzzle — "

"Were they ? "

"They are not now — I know."

Mrs. Trenchard's hands trembled nervously as she placed her finger-tips on the table.

"I suppose it is true?" he asked.

"What —"

"About Zelie?"

"Oh yes, it is quite true."

"Why did you deceive me? You did not only suppress the truth, you did not simply keep silence, you went out of your way to invent a story. You deliberately deceived me."

"Was n't there a time when you deceived me?" she retorted.

"But your motive? I cannot perceive it. Why did you set yourself to deceive me?"

"I told you merely what I have told everybody any time these twenty years," she cried. "It was no new thing. I had no time for thought. I was taken entirely by surprise. How could I tell what you would do!"

"Would to God you had told me!"

"I have sometimes been tempted to tell you since. After Zelie's death, if I lost her as I feared, I should have told you. All the world may know, if she does not."

"She is not going to die, Cecily."

"I don't know. It is impossible to tell. The doctor here fears worse than death. She is eating her heart out. Only I know how ill she is. She is a girl who struggles to appear at her best—"

"If you had only been candid with me!" he exclaimed.

"What difference could it have made! Did you ever care yet for anything or anybody besides yourself? Time was, when I would have given the world to be able to confide in you, to have you near me. That was twenty years ago. But you had gone away and taken care I should not be able to reach you—"

"But at least do me justice. I had no idea — I did not dream—"

"I was alone. Barely eighteen — younger than Zelie is now. You had taken me from the only friends I had. You went away and left me in the heart of London. You knew I was ignorant of the world — innocent till I met you. I was alone when my child was born, and after that I hardly wanted to find you. I had little hope from you. If I had not met my husband —"

"How old was Zelie on your marriage?" Passingham asked.

"Not quite nine months. For years I endured life. My husband hated Zelie, but he kept his promise. He, at least, did not betray me."

"But if you had been honest with me, Cecily, if you had not left me in the dark, I might —"

"You cannot conceive all that would have implied," she returned. "All those years I tried to make amends. I studied, I improved myself, I did what little good I could. After my husband's death my hands were freer.

Zelie lived with me then, and loved me, honoured me. I was happy then. How could I tell how you would act? You might interfere, you might tell Lord Dewhurst. Afterwards I was tempted, but I never really decided to tell you till the idea occurred to me that Lady Dewhurst's illness was a fraud —"

"No, no, it was not a fraud."

"Then," she continued, ignoring his assertion, "if Zelie died, I determined you should know it was your own child you had killed."

"She must n't die, Cecily. I only learnt the fact in a roundabout way yesterday —"

"Does Lady Dewhurst know?"

"No, I think I have prevented that. I knew only yesterday morning; I hastened to this place last night."

"Oh, but why distress yourself?"

"I can't tell you why. I could n't help myself."

"You could desert Zelie's mother —"

"Cecily, I did not know you were likely to become a mother."

"If you had known you would probably have taken stricter precautions!"

"You have formed a pleasing opinion of me," he said.

"You know what materials I had!"

"We sha'n't profit by retrospection, either of us," he said. "I don't pretend to any occult sympathy with Zelie from the first. I did like the child that afternoon you introduced me to her. I am a fair judge of my kind. I saw what she was —"

"Yet not worthy to become Lord Dewhurst's wife!"

"The question of merit did not arise. I think you understand. God knows you have no reason to regard me as a man of sentiment. I have set my face against that sort of thing —"

"With admirable success."

"You are harder than you used to be," he said.

"Yes, I have learnt in a hard school. I have toiled during the heat of the day. I have done my best — Zelie proves with what success. All that time you held aloof. At the eleventh hour you came to spoil my work!"

"I am here to-day to try to pull things together," he said. "What else do you think brings me?"

"Ah, you have come too late."

"I hope not. I want you to understand me. I confess that I am far from comprehending myself. I have told you I liked Zelie, — liked and admired her. But when the truth was thrust upon me yesterday — oh, you would laugh if I were to tell you —"

"There does n't appear to be much temptation to be mirthful," she answered drearily.

"I suppose," he continued, "we are all creatures of heredity —"

"You are still able to analyse your emotions and to enjoy them," she cried.

"I suppose," he said, "countless genera-

tions have handed this instinct down to us. It entirely surpasses my power of reasoning. It is quite beyond my control. Cecily, it is God's truth. This girl of yours — of yours and mine — is dearer to me since yesterday than all my world; dearer than fame, fortune, power, everything. Believe it or not, as you please —"

"It seems a little sudden," she said, but not ungently.

"I know; but it is the fact, a fact due to something outside and beyond myself. Candour is the order of the day. I did ask Feversham to make the most of Lady Dewhurst's illness. She was ill, but the danger was less immediate than Dewhurst was led to believe. If Zelie die, her death will lie at my door. I want you to help me to prevent it."

"How?" she cried eagerly.

"I don't know. At present I cannot see my way. But I am not often defeated, I generally get what I want."

"No man can conquer death!"

"I will spare no effort to avert it. I am showing you my naked soul! It is not a thing I go in for. One prefers the clothes of civilisation. It is for this time only. But I want you to believe me. I want you to work with me in this. I want to convince you that the chief object of my life is to restore Zelie's happiness."

Mrs. Trenchard walked to one of the windows. Turning her back to the room, she looked forth at the sea. There was a brief silence.

"I think I do believe you," she said presently.

"You may — implicitly."

"Yes, I do."

He stood by the sofa, resting his hands on its head. After a few moments he recovered his self-possession. He became once more a calm, shrewd man of the world; his tone regained its customary lightness.

"Now," he said, "how to set to work!"

"There is only one way," she answered, sitting down. "Won't you take a chair, Mr. Passingham?"

He laughed queerly.

"An approach to bathos!"

"What is?"

"To address me in that way now."

"A rose —"

"Oh, we have done with reminiscences."

"One cannot help a sense of envy," she said.

"Of what?"

"Your extraordinary facility."

"You place yourself at a disadvantage by remembering," he answered.

She looked at him angrily.

"I don't count myself at a disadvantage," she said, "not where you are concerned. You have taken elaborate pains to explain your position. Understand mine. I know there are numerous excellent persons who would stone me, but with you I am absolutely equal."

"No," he cried.

"Absolutely —"

"My dear Cecily, you are infinitely superior."

"Oh," she exclaimed, half-way between tears and a smile, "you have no vulnerable spot!"

"I am not at all sure," he said quietly. "However, we wander from the point. If you can't address me as you used, don't give me a name at all. For Zelie's mother to address Zelie's father as Mr. Passingham is absurd. You suggested a way to restore her!"

"Whisper that her lover will come again," said Mrs. Trenchard, gently, "the roses will return to her cheeks, the light to her eyes. She will blossom again like a flower in spring."

He rose abruptly.

"Well, I must think about it. What are you reading?" he asked, taking a book from the table.

"Dante."

"Can you manage it in the original?"

"Oh, yes."

"When may I see Zelie?"

"Oh, I am afraid —"

"I 've got to see her," he insisted. "You need have no fear. I am nothing if not discreet. May I come after luncheon?"

"She goes out at four o'clock in a Bath-chair."

"May I meet you?"

"We shall be going towards the west," she answered.

Chapter Fourteenth

ZELIE was being drawn along the esplanade in a Bath-chair, when she saw Passingham approach. Raising his hat, he turned to walk by her side.

"Thank you so much for the roses," she said. "I could n't imagine who sent them. We know nobody in St. Leonard's."

"That sounds rather slow."

"Oh, I seem to dream the hours away," she answered.

"We intend to alter all that," said Mrs. Trenchard.

"I hope so, Zelie — I am old enough to be your father, you know," Passingham added quickly.

On reaching the end of the esplanade, the chair was drawn close to the paling.

The chairman retired to the nearest post, whilst Mrs. Trenchard sat down in a "shelter" a few yards away. Leaning against the paling, with his back to the sea, Passingham looked at Zelie.

"Are you fond of the sea?" he asked.

"Very."

"Do you think you would enjoy a voyage?"

"Yes, a long, long voyage!"

"To come back quite well and strong again."

"I should not want to come back," she said. "How still and beautiful it looks to-day! Impossible to think the sea can ever be cruel."

"Is that a parable?"

"A parable?"

"Were you thinking that on life's fair days unhappiness seems equally inconceivable?"

She looked at him contemplatively a few moments, then a pitiful kind of smile parted her lips.

"The hands are the hands of Esau —"

"I am far from seeking to rob any one of a birthright," he said hastily. "Perhaps," he continued in the grave, almost tender tone which had struck the girl, "you were thinking the converse: that on life's darkest day it is impossible to contemplate the cessation of the storm, — that the sky will ever be blue and clear again!"

He saw signs of tears in Zelie's eyes.

"That, you know," he said, "is quite a delusion. The meteorological office would soon undeceive you. Have you any faith in prophecy?"

"What 's done can't be undone," she returned.

"I am not at all sure of that, Zelie."

"I am afraid I can't argue," she said. "I cannot talk very much."

"Will you listen? Don't attempt to answer — what a luxury to have one's say without retort! Are you fond of stories, Zelie? Shall I tell you a tale?"

Her gaze became more expectant as he continued : —

"Once upon a time there was a very beautiful — well, she was n't a princess, but she ought to have been. At all events, there was one who thought so. He saw her one day when she was exchanging flowers for gold, and took care to see her again. But he was a real live prince, Zelie, and the queen, his mother, would not look upon the sweet girl he loved. So she summoned her chief minister. Now the chief minister was very cunning and he was also a magician. Owing to his machinations, the prince did n't come any more and she who ought to have been a princess fell ill. Are you listening, Zelie ? "

"Yes," she whispered, "I am listening."

"I want you to listen to this part, because it conveys the moral. Now I have told you that the chief minister was a magician. But there was a magic more potent than his, Zelie, and this was contained in the girl's

own self. It shone forth from her eyes, it influenced each word she spoke, and, hoary and abandoned as the chief minister was, he fell under its spell. He knew it was working on him, he began to feel all sorts of strange emotions, and yet he became quite powerless to prevent them. If he could have prevented them, no doubt, he would have continued along his old path, because it used to be really a very agreeable path. But he could n't tread it any longer, whether he would or no. He found himself compelled to turn round and go back the way he had come. The same magic which had wrought destruction on the lovers must be employed in their service, you see. I have nearly finished my story — are you listening, Zelie? Don't speak. But I want you not to miss this part."

As she signified assent, he observed how white her face had become, even whiter than it had been before, and the peculiar, longing expression of her eyes.

"Well," said Passingham, "the chief minister set to work. He did all that magicians and wizards and that kind of folk usually do. He kindled a fire of unpleasant materials, he muttered incantations, and so forth. And presently the Oracle began to work. And in a short time the prince came again. The queen, his mother, smiled upon his beloved. You see, Zelie, it is an old-fashioned story and not at all up to date, for everybody lived happy ever after."

He drew nearer as he spoke, and now stood with his right hand on the hood of the chair.

Zelie rested her fingers upon it lightly.

"Is it a — a true story?" she asked.

"Every word of it."

"I should — I should love that magician, Mr. Passingham."

"That is what he would wish, Zelie."

"Will you call the chair-man?" she asked quietly. "I should like to go home now."

Passingham fell behind with Mrs. Trenchard as they returned along the sunny esplanade.

"I hope Zelie won't be over-tired," she said. "She has n't stayed out so long before. What did you find to talk about?"

"Oh, I was telling her a little story. You may be perfectly sure that no story of mine would lack a moral."

"I know," she answered. "There was a time when I listened to one."

"I want you to listen to another, Cecily."

Mrs. Trenchard stared at the Bath-chair a few yards ahead.

"When may I see you alone?" he asked.

"What is your object?"

"I have just told you."

"After dinner this evening. I can only spare you a few minutes from Zelie."

"Not this evening. Would noon to-morrow be convenient?"

"I suppose you are not entirely certain as to the incidents —"

"Not quite, perhaps; almost. In these latter days I never act impulsively. If ever I contemplate any action of more than usual importance, I always sleep over it. May I come at noon to-morrow?"

"Oh, yes, if you wish to come."

"And you will allow me the privilege of seeing you alone."

The Bath-chair was crossing the road, and as it reached the curb on the farther side, Mrs. Trenchard went to Zelie.

"You are not very tired, darling?" she asked anxiously.

Zelie looked into her face almost cheerfully.

"Oh, no. I feel better."

"You won't forget my story," said Passingham, helping her to alight.

"No, I sha'n't forget it."

"And you are to remember it is true. If one can't sleep at night, it is an excellent plan to repeat something of that kind, you know."

Zelie turned, facing Passingham on the doorstep.

"That chief minister must be tremendously powerful," she said.

"Well, you see, he was working under a spell, Zelie."

Chapter Fifteenth

POSSESSED by an unusual restlessness, Passingham had scarcely returned to his hotel before he determined to pay a flying visit to London. He set forth to the railway station, succeeded in catching a train, drove from Victoria to his rooms, and soon afterwards occupied his customary seat in the House of Commons. Taking part in the debate, by general consent, he made one of his most successful speeches.

The following morning saw him early at breakfast; he drove to the terminus, travelled back to St. Leonard's, and a few minutes before noon, entered Mrs. Trenchard's presence. He wore a light gray frock coat, with a rosebud in the button-hole, and looked as spick and span as if he had just left the hands of his valet.

"Zelie," he said, "she is no worse?"

"No, I think she seems better. If she is not actually stronger, she is at least less melancholy. Dr. Brodrick was quite pleased —"

"Then my ministrations were successful?"

"You have rekindled her hopes. That was a remedy I knew must prove successful. But if this fresh spark dies out, her last state will be worse than her first."

"I want to talk about that. Will you sit down?"

She took a chair, whilst he placed his white hat on the table and sat down facing her.

"I have pondered the matter," he said, "and only one way presents itself. You may not think it a desirable way."

"If it secures Zelie's happiness! But I can't conceive —"

"You see our chief difficulty is to reconcile Lady Dewhurst. As things were, it's no use denying —"

"Nothing has altered," said Mrs. Trenchard. "Everything is just the same."

"No, no. I was blind who now see, and I propose to transform all things. But I want your assistance and — perhaps you won't believe me — but I am a little afraid of you."

"Conscience doth make cowards of us all."

"I am going to ask you to marry me," he said.

She began nervously to plait the common black and green tablecloth between her fingers.

"Does the notion commend itself?" he asked.

"It seems a little belated," she retorted.

"Still, try to consider it on its merits. I refrain from any display of emotion —"

"Surely it would be out of place."

"But, you perceive, I 'm compelled to cry up my own wares. I am very rich. They are kind enough to say I have a future. I fancy you have a share of ambition; I can promise to gratify it —"

"For Zelie's sake?"

"It is no use to deny it. I can only ask you to act for her sake too."

"Are you contented that I should act only for Zelie's sake?"

He laughed in a quiet, self-satisfied way.

"You have already done so much for her, even trained her to read you my political speeches!"

Mrs. Trenchard's face flushed like a girl's.

"You remember that!" she said. "At least you have convinced me of your regard for Zelie. Of course, you offer me an enormous temptation."

"Why attempt to resist it?"

"Because I am a woman —"

"Therefore to be won."

"But not to be bought! Even at the price of my child's life!"

"At least I shall be proud of my bargain," he said. "You are a very beautiful woman, Cecily. You are far more beautiful than

you were twenty years ago. You have blossomed —"

"In the dust!"

"Besides, you have a marvellous faculty of holding your own. I fancy that despite all my faults I am easy to live with. You will see Zelie happy — you can share her triumph in addition to your own. Look at the reverse of the shield —"

"I am too familiar with that!" she cried.

He rose and came close to her side.

"Well, Cecily, what is it to be?" he asked, looking down at her head. She rose also, and with a familiar action he took in his fingers a piece of lace which hung from the front of her frock. She drew slightly nearer, and he felt her perfumed breath. Placing his right arm about her, he stooped, kissing her forehead.

"Is it settled, Cecily?" he asked.

"Our bargain — yes, I suppose so."

"I think we 'll forget that aspect of it," he said, toying with her hair. "Now, as to

methods. I am afraid I shall have to give you a short shrift."

"Is that necessary?"

"Very desirable."

"But if Zelie knows. If I explain —"

"I am a mass of selfishness, as you know, Cecily."

"Oh," she said, "it may be as you please."

He spent the next half-hour discussing his plans for the future, then rose to go away.

"To-night," he said, "I am compelled to sleep in London, and to-morrow; the following day, I hope to return. In the mean time you will have enlightened Zelie. A surprise for her!"

"Not for Zelie only. Lady Dewhurst, for instance."

"No doubt," he said with a short laugh.

"You will not —"

"My dear Cecily!"

"Nor Lord Dewhurst?"

"Dewhurst must hear everything. But you need not fear —"

"Will he still marry Zelie?" she asked eagerly.

"That is my only doubt. But I think so, and I know him. Lady Dewhurst I can satisfy. Of course, I am prepared to dower Zelie liberally."

"When shall you tell Lord Dewhurst?"

"Afterwards."

"Oh, but won't you run the risk of throwing yourself away?" she cried.

"Undoubtedly," he answered cheerfully, and took her in his arms, kissed her, and went away. As soon as he left the room, she walked to the window, pressing her face against the pane till he was out of sight. Then, sitting down on Zelie's sofa, she rested her chin on her hands and remained brooding for many minutes. Rising, she laughed aloud. Her eyes, tearful a little while ago, wore a look of triumphant elation. Leaving the sitting-room, she went upstairs to Zelie.

"Was that Mr. Passingham?" Zelie asked, as Mrs. Trenchard closed the door.

"Yes, dear."

"What a long time he stayed!"

"Did he, Zelie?"

Mrs. Trenchard stooped beside the bed upon which her daughter lay, fully dressed.

"Mother dear, how sweet and pretty you look!" she exclaimed.

"Do you think so?"

"I believe you are growing vain!"

"I have some news for you, Zelie."

"Good news?"

"Yes, I hope so."

"Oh, tell me, mother!" Zelie cried, a little wearily.

"Mr. Passingham has asked me to be his wife."

"The idea! You have not seen him half-a-dozen times."

"Nevertheless I have promised, Zelie!"

There was a long pause. Then Zelie sat up and put her feet to the ground. Going to the dressing-table, she began to put her

hair in order, observing her mother covertly in the looking-glass.

"You are to be quick and get well," said Mrs. Trenchard, turning her back. "We are going to take you away on the yacht. You know, Zelie, Lord Dewhurst has a place in Hampshire, and we intend to be in the Solent for the regatta —"

"But, mother, that will be almost directly!"

"Mr. Passingham wishes the wedding to take place at once. You will become quite a grand personage —"

"At present I am a very bewildered one," said Zelie.

"One soon grows accustomed to new ideas," was the answer. "Shall we go downstairs? Luncheon ought to be ready."

Zelie caught her hands as she went towards the door.

"Mother," she said, "are you doing this for my sake?"

"One generally acts from mixed motives, you know."

"But are you happy?"

"Yes, Zelie, very happy, happier than I ever expected to be again. Come, dear."

Arm in arm they left the room.

Chapter Sixteenth

At five o'clock that afternoon Passingham alighted from a hansom at the door of Lady Dewhurst's house in Hill Street.

"Is Lord Dewhurst at home?" he asked.

"His lordship is not at 'ome, sir."

"Lady Dewhurst?"

"In the drawing-room, sir."

"Downstairs?"

"The first time to-day, sir."

Passingham followed the butler. As he entered the room, Lady Dewhurst rose with an exclamation of surprise, receiving him with every sign of cordial welcome.

"Ubiquitous man!" she exclaimed. "When I read your speech I could hardly believe my eyes. Quite one of your best efforts. Are you better — but you look worlds better!"

"Yes, I am very well," he said, and they both sat down.

"What caused the change in your plans?" Lady Dewhurst inquired.

"I came up to-day —"

"Yesterday, you mean!"

"I went back again to St. Leonard's this morning," he explained.

She smiled upon him tolerantly.

"You are becoming erratic, Rowland."

"I came to-day, because I have some rather important news and I wanted you to hear it first from my own lips."

"You don't expect a majority to-night?"

"Oh dear, no. My news is domestic rather than political."

"Domestic!"

"The fact is, I am going to be married."

Lady Dewhurst looked at first surprised, then distinctly annoyed; finally, she assumed a mask-like smile.

"The news will be in all the evening papers," he said, "and I wished to tell you myself. Of course, you are surprised."

"My dear Rowland, I have lived too long to be surprised at anything. Do I know the lady?"

"No, you don't know her —"

"She is young, of course?"

"Of a — a suitable age."

"That might be anything from seventeen to thirty-seven!"

He was obviously a little nervous.

"It is Mrs. Trenchard," he said, and began to rearrange the flower in his button-hole.

"Mrs. Trenchard!" Lady Dewhurst ejaculated. "Not —"

"I fancied you might be a little astonished," he answered. "The worst of it is, one can't lead up gradually to this sort of thing. Finesse is useless —"

"You know you have my best wishes," said Lady Dewhurst, gravely.

"Thank you," he cried, rising. "I am sure of that."

"Is the wedding likely to take place soon?"

"Immediately."

She nodded her head slightly a few times. The situation seemed to be tending towards embarrassment. Passingham offered his hand.

"I hope you will be one of the first to call upon my wife," he said.

"Of course," she returned, "you know we are going into Hampshire. We shall not be in London again for a long time. Must you go?"

"Good-bye," he said.

"Good-bye, Rowland."

He walked to the door and went downstairs. Hailing the first hansom, he was driven to Victoria Street.

"If Lord Dewhurst calls during my absence," he said to his man, "I shall be pleased to see him at breakfast to-morrow."

"Yes, sir."

"I particularly wish to see him."

"I understand, sir."

After attending to a few letters and tele-

grams, Passingham set forth to the House of Commons. There he soon became surrounded by his more intimate acquaintances. He was accused of unjustifiable reticence. Felicitations poured in upon him from men of every party.

"Has Lord Dewhurst been here?" he asked on returning to his rooms.

"No, sir."

"Whenever he calls, I will see him."

It was eleven o'clock the next morning when Digby arrived. Hearing his voice outside, Passingham leaned forward to read his newspaper more attentively. Then, the door opening, the servant announced, —

"Lord Dewhurst."

Passingham pushed back his chair and rose, offering his right hand.

"Ah, Digby!"

"What the deuce does it mean?" demanded Digby.

"What does what mean? Won't you sit down?"

"When my mother told me yesterday, I flatly refused to believe it — "

"Hardly the kind of story Lady Dewhurst would — would invent," said Passingham, lighting a cigarette.

"But it is in all the papers — "

"What better evidence could you desire?"

"Look here, Passingham, what on earth does it mean?" Digby persisted.

"What does it say? A marriage has been arranged and will shortly take place, et cetera, et cetera. He who runs may read."

"But I can't understand it. What object can you have?"

"Object — Mrs. Trenchard, naturally."

"More than that — "

"Ah, I see, you want to get at the real inwardness — "

"Bosh!" exclaimed Digby. "You haven't seen her half-a-dozen times."

Passingham laughed quietly.

"The boot is on the other foot," he said. "A few days ago I was the lecturer,

now you discourse concerning my own marriage."

"Only I am not seeking to prevent yours!"

"No, that would hardly be your rôle, my friend."

"It 's not as if you were the man —"

"For what?"

"To lose your head for a woman. Heart you 've none, I 'll swear. Look here, Passingham, I want to get at your motive —"

"My dear fellow, you make one tired. A man does n't always act from a deliberate motive. You get up crusty in the morning and quarrel with your best friend from sheer cussedness, or you make a fool of yourself after dinner —"

"But you never dine!"

"I am going to be married, anyhow. And if you 're wise, you 'll take the good the gods provide and be grateful."

"You thwart my marriage with the daughter —"

"I —"

"You do your level best, at all events, and end by marrying the mother."

"One man's meat is proverbially another's poison, you know," said Passingham.

"What," asked Digby, "is going to happen to Zelie?"

"Perhaps that depends on you rather than on me."

"How 's that?"

"You understand that a party in office is vastly different from the same party in opposition. At present Zelie is far from well —"

"Is she at St. Leonard's?" demanded Digby, with considerable eagerness.

"I left her there yesterday. As soon as my marriage has taken place, we shall hasten her away for a short cruise —"

"I say, Passingham, are you going to invite me to your wedding?"

"Can't say the idea had occurred to me. Still, if you are impatient to congratulate

Mrs. Trenchard — if you think you can conscientiously congratulate her, you may come down with me —"

"The confounded part of it is, it may just make my mother ill again."

Passingham lighted a fresh cigarette.

"I fancy Lady Dewhurst's cure is permanent," he said. "Open your mind to facts. Zelie will be as my own daughter. You have sufficient imagination to perceive what kind of success she will make socially. As to money, that will not be wanting."

"When are you going down?" asked Digby.

"Eleven o'clock to-morrow morning. Pick me up here at half-past ten. By the bye, you are going into Hampshire —"

"Next week."

"We shall be at Cowes for the regatta."

"Oh, I say, that'll be ripping," Digby exclaimed.

"One condition I have to make. A new potentate always likes to exercise authority.

See Zelie as often as you please, but we are under a new régime, you understand."

"That 's about all I can understand."

"Is n't it enough? Before you arrive at anything definite with Zelie, you must go through the form of asking my permission — "

"You have practically accorded it!"

"Still," answered Passingham, "I shall have something to say."

Digby did not think it necessary to inform Lady Dewhurst of his destination. It may have been that she believed he was actuated by a filial desire to prepare the way for her at the place in Hampshire. But at eleven o'clock the following morning he set forth with Passingham, and arrived at St. Leonard's in due course. On reaching the hotel, the first thing which Passingham did was to write a short note and send it to Mrs. Trenchard.

Chapter Seventeenth

"ZELIE," said Mrs. Trenchard, having read Passingham's letter, "another piece of news!"

"Good again, mother?"

"Mr. Passingham is here. He is coming at half-past three. With him —"

"Digby, mother?"

"Yes, darling; Digby."

Already she looked a great deal brighter. Her face was still very different from what it used to be a few weeks ago; but the light was returning to her eyes, and just now her cheeks certainly did not lack colour.

"My Bath-chair is ordered for half-past three," she said later on. "Ought I to send to put it off?"

"Perhaps Lord Dewhurst will relieve me by constituting himself your escort, Zelie!"

Going upstairs, Zelie did not reappear until a few minutes before half-past three. She wore her hat and jacket, and her face showed signs of tears.

Mrs. Trenchard shook her head reproachfully.

"I could n't help it, mother," Zelie answered. "They were not unhappy ones."

Shortly afterwards Passingham entered with Dewhurst, who came to Mrs. Trenchard with congratulations. Then he turned towards Zelie. As their hands met, Passingham and Mrs. Trenchard were gazing out of one of the windows. It was an emotional moment; the next Digby was trying to talk in a perfectly commonplace tone.

"You have been ill," he said.

"Oh, I am worlds better!"

"You are not going out —"

"You saw my chair at the door."

"Oh, but, I say —"

"Won't you come with me, Digby?" she

asked; and when they left the room, Mrs. Trenchard turned to Passingham.

"You have not let the grass grow under your feet," she said.

"I have a special licence in my pocket," was the answer.

"I did not mean — In bringing Lord Dewhurst. Is it judicious to throw them together again?"

"It seems a kind of natural gravitation!"

"Before you have spoken to him?"

"I have spoken at great length. It was difficult to allay his astonishment."

"Zelie has not recovered from hers yet. I wish Lord Dewhurst had been told before he came again."

"I wanted him to come again before he knew."

"Why?" she asked.

"Once the old order is renewed, it will be more difficult to draw back — to desire to draw back."

"It will be terrible for Zelie if he should, Rowland."

"He won't," was the answer. "Some men might. I don't think Digby is one of them."

In the mean time the Bath-chair had reached the end of the esplanade, and without orders the chair-man retired to the nearest post.

Digby made a pretence of adjusting the hood.

"How good it is to see you again!" he whispered.

Zelie sighed contentedly.

"Your mother is better?" she asked presently.

"Almost well again."

"Does she know you are here?"

"She has n't the remotest idea."

"Then —"

"Passingham says it will be all right. I am not of an exacting disposition, so that I get what most I want. I was satisfied with his assurance."

"Mr. Passingham seems to be a very

wonderful person," cried Zelie. "He can do whatever he pleases —"

"With Mrs. Trenchard, for instance."

"Oh, I have given my mother up! I simply can't fathom her. To realise she is going to be married is utterly impossible."

"Rather soon, too. But, for that matter, I suppose every woman could be persuaded —"

Zelie shook her head.

"I should never have married if —"

"If what, Zelie?"

She looked up without speaking.

"If I had not come again! Had you quite given me up?"

"Quite."

"Was that the cause of your illness?"

"Oh," she murmured, "I did not want to live. I prayed I might die. Then Mr. Passingham came. He stood just where you are standing, and told me the sweetest story in the world —"

"What was it about, dear?"

"It was n't very new. About a prince and a — a beggar-maid —"

"A beggar-maid no longer, anyhow!"

"Ah," she said dreamily, "thanks to the magician."

"The magician — who is the Johnny?" asked Digby.

"The chief minister — Mr. Passingham."

"Ah, well," said Digby, somewhat at a loss, "they say he may be that one day. You know," he added, "things don't seem quite the same. There are visions about. You won't be the same Zelie —"

"Always — though I am to be known as Zelie Passingham. They both wish it."

"A very temporary measure," he answered. "You will be Zelie, Countess of Dewhurst. By the bye, I suppose you know you are going to Cowes and that my place is on the opposite coast. I have a convenient canoe, dearest."

"Will Lady Dewhurst be there?"

"Yes. You are sure to run against her. There will be all manner of festivities. Your mother will go everywhere; you, too,

of course. Life is worth living again, Zelie, and last week I was a God-forsaken pessimist."

He put the thumb and forefinger of his right hand into his waistcoat pocket, and took out the ring which Zelie had returned to him not very long ago.

She looked quickly along the sunny esplanade. It seemed to be deserted at that hour in the afternoon. The Bath-chairman was covertly smoking a short clay pipe, with his back turned.

Zelie unbuttoned her left-hand glove.

"I 'm afraid I must n't put it on," said Digby.

"Why — why not?" Zelie asked.

"Passingham makes conditions. I am to have the right of access, but nothing more until he is pleased to grant permission. Put a beggar on horseback, you know! Of course, it is utter nonsense. My mother's objection was the only obstacle, and that he undertakes to remove. However, it does n't

make much difference. We shall have a ripping time at Cowes, then I shall respectfully ask papa and receive his blessing — Passingham's blessing! and you will come to me at last, Zelie?"

"Yes," she said, "I will come, Digby."

"You see," he continued, "there are to be no more difficulties."

"No more," she said a little wearily. "I think I must go home now," she added.

The chair-man thrust his pipe alight in his pocket, and touched his hat at Digby's summons. He moved the Bath-chair, and Dewhurst walked by Zelie's side in the sunshine.

Chapter Eighteenth

PASSINGHAM's steam yacht "Mermaiden" lay off the mouth of the Medina. Zelie reclined in a deck-chair, whilst Lord Dewhurst, whose canoe floated alongside the vessel, leaned against the taffrail.

"How charmingly cool you look!" he said. "I like you best in white, I think."

"Do you?"

"Of course, I like you in everything —"

"How you repeat yourself!" she cried with a laugh. "I am glad the crowd of boats has gone —"

"I 'm not."

"You took an interest in the racing —"

"It implies that the 'Mermaiden' will follow suit. Are you eager to go, Zelie?"

"Oh, it 's too hot to feel eager," she answered. "I am entirely passive —"

"I have been passive long enough. Besides, I am labouring under a severe disappointment."

"Your looks belie you."

"I hoped Passingham would take me to Norway."

"Perhaps he will —"

"You sail the day after to-morrow."

"What may n't a day bring forth? We have reason to know."

He put his finger and thumb into his jacket-pocket.

"I 'm still carting this about wherever I go," he said, holding up the ring. "By the bye, you met my mother again yesterday."

"At Lady Renshaw's."

"Well?"

"Oh, even the refrigerators can't keep things cold in this temperature."

"She — she spoke to you?"

"Yes, Lady Dewhurst was gracious enough to unbend. It appears my face is familiar to her; I remind her of some-

body unknown. Do I remind you of anybody?"

"Let me look at you."

"You do that too often!"

"Not often enough. Raise your eyes, darling. No, there is nobody like you —"

As he spoke, Mrs. Passingham came on deck.

"Ah, Lord Dewhurst!" she cried, "you are the most energetic man in the world."

"Call it enthusiasm, Mrs. Passingham. "I was just lamenting your departure."

"One likes to be missed," she said.

"Shall you be away long?"

"About a month."

"Too cruel!" he exclaimed.

"Rather delightful, I think. We shall be entirely alone —"

"That 's an aggravation of the offence."

Zelie looked up laughingly into her mother's eyes.

"Is n't he barefaced?" she said.

"You are, Zelie. The sun is too

strong. Go to the cabin and fetch your hat."

"Allow me —"

"No, Lord Dewhurst, Zelie will go," said Mrs. Passingham. "We met your mother yesterday," she added, taking Zelie's chair.

"She told me."

"It will be lonely for you when everybody has gone."

"Lonely is n't the word!"

"Have you ever been to the North Cape?"

"I pine to go again."

She looked at him significantly.

"One or two people are coming to-morrow," she said. "Perhaps you will be able to bring Lady Dewhurst."

At half-past four the following afternoon, the deck of the "Mermaiden" was filled with a smart throng. While Zelie was assisting to entertain her mother's guests, Passingham suddenly walked forward. A smile of satis-

faction crossed his face as he greeted Lady Dewhurst.

"You know how seldom I trust myself on the water," she said. "Take me to your wife."

Mrs. Passingham was winning golden opinions, never more freely than to-day. She received Lady Dewhurst with a grace and dignity that even her guest admitted to be irreproachable.

"Your wife is charming," she said, standing apart with Passingham a quarter of an hour later.

"Praise from Sir Hubert Stanley! And my daughter?"

"Is she really a subject for congratulation?"

"I think so. Don't you fancy she will be a success next season?"

"Undoubtedly."

"One may reasonably expect her to make an excellent marriage. She is young, beautiful—"

"Her face reminds me —"

"Does it? You know one often experiences that kind of sensation. It is to be explained —"

"I detest explanations, Rowland," cried Lady Dewhurst.

"Yes — they so often savour of the apologetic," he answered.

"Miss Trenchard needs no apology."

"Miss Passingham —"

"Her name is Trenchard."

"A whim of my own. She has youth, beauty, a fair dowry —"

"You are generous!"

"You will not misunderstand me —"

"Oh, I shall never pretend to understand a man again!" she said.

"Zelie will have about two thousand a year on her marriage, more at my death —"

"Pray don't be gloomy."

"It is the shadow of our departure. You know we sail to-morrow. We shall be quite alone —"

"Are n't you afraid of boring one another to death?" Lady Dewhurst asked.

"That is why I had an idea of inviting Digby."

"Short notice for a long voyage!"

"I fancy he keeps his lamp burning. I never heard a man throw out so many hints. There would be myself, my wife — and Zelie. If you think you will miss Digby — "

"I have not enjoyed much of his society since your arrival."

"Then shall I invite him?"

"You know I am conquered," Lady Dewhurst answered. "I suppose he must go."

"He has n't accepted yet," said Passingham, quietly. "He can return after he has landed you and talk about it."

An hour later Mr. and Mrs. Passingham stood on the "Mermaiden's" bridge, gazing across the Solent towards the Hampshire shore.

"Dewhurst has put off in his canoe," said Passingham.

"How will he take it?" she asked a little anxiously.

"Heaven knows! But I have n't much doubt. He has seen Zelie twice a day for the last week!"

"I wish it were not necessary, Rowland."

"Every cupboard has its skeleton," he said.

"Ours is so ugly!"

"Difficult to associate you and ugliness, Cecily."

"You are satisfied with me?" she asked, looking into his face.

"Perfectly. Moreover, you make me satisfied with myself. That is a woman's grand secret! Still, I 've a bad quarter of an hour before me. Digby has views!"

"You offer a great temptation," she said.

"Zelie — yes!"

"Oh, he can't have the heart to resist!"

"He will be here in two minutes," said Passingham, as Digby plied his paddle

deftly. "Keep Zelie below and I will hold the conference in the deck-house."

"The first unhappy moment since my marriage," she whispered, turning away.

"The last, I hope, Cecily."

Mrs. Passingham went below, and after a few words to Zelie returned to the deck. There she sat down at a short distance from the cabin to which her husband had conducted Digby. Her hands were lightly clasped, and she did not remove her eyes from the closed door one instant during the interview.

Passingham laid his white cap on the oval table on the opposite side of which sat Digby. Across it the two men looked at each other for a minute in silence.

"I am glad Lady Dewhurst came," said Passingham, presently.

"It 's awfully good of you to invite me —"

"We shall be glad of an extra hand," was the answer; "but before we sail, I should

like to show our colours. You know I don't go in for melodrama — "

"Not much!"

"Still, I have to exact a kind of pledge. I want your word to keep inviolate what I am going to say — from your mother; from Zelie — whether she becomes your wife or not."

"I don't think there 's much doubt about that," said Digby, regarding Passingham with evident astonishment.

"It rests with you."

"I don't quite understand — "

"It is n't every young man who has your admirable discretion. When I was five-and-twenty I made the acquaintance of a Miss Edington. Her father, a major in the artillery, had gone the way of all flesh; the daughter fell on evil days. Now your imagination is sufficiently vivid — "

"Oh, quite!"

"My father at that time was living in Florence. I received a summons. He was

ill. I left Miss Edington with a considerable sum of money, without my address. Several years passed before I saw her again —"

Digby started to his feet.

"Good God!" he cried, "is Miss Edington —"

"Better sit down till I've finished," said Passingham. "I sha'n't keep you long. Now, we skip over a period of twenty years to the day I first called in Avenue Road."

Digby was fidgeting restlessly on his seat.

"Of course, I entertained no suspicion that Mrs. Trenchard would prove to be —"

"Look here, Passingham," cried Digby, "you need not tell me any more. I want to get outside —"

"My dear fellow, it 's no gratification to me to stir the mud. I'm going to the bottom of it, though some of us must get splashed. Less than two years after I left her, Miss Edington became Mrs. Trenchard."

"Is that all?" demanded Digby.

"Not quite. I sha'n't bother you with

needless details. Explanations are tedious at the best. Your mother, not satisfied with Mrs. Trenchard's account of herself, instructed Dixon to make inquiries. You remember his coming — "

"Oh, I remember!"

"Well; from him I learnt for the first time that Zelie was not born subsequently to her mother's marriage — Have I said enough?" asked Passingham, looking straight into Digby's face.

"Quite."

"You understand — "

"I don't understand your marriage!"

"Yet you have seen my wife. I had discovered that Zelie was my daughter. She was very ill. I had wrought against her — "

"Ah, that pricked you!" cried Digby.

"Yes, that pricked me."

Digby sat staring down at the table.

"Well," demanded Passingham, "what are you going to do?"

"What am I going to do!"

"Are you coming with Zelie to Norway?"

Digby gripped the edge of the table and glared across it at his interlocutor.

"You don't imagine that because you were an infernal —"

Passingham leaned forward, lightly touching his right shoulder. He looked intensely relieved.

"Come," he said with a quiet laugh, "try to cultivate respect for your father-in-law."

"I wish to heaven you had not told me," he exclaimed.

"You see, you might have found it out."

Digby rose and put on his cap.

"We weigh anchor at two o'clock to-morrow," Passingham added.

"Oh," cried Digby, "let 's get out of this!"

Followed by Passingham, he opened the door and made his way to the deck. Seeing Mrs. Passingham, he strode towards her. She rose, drawing herself erect and holding forth her hand; he was too preoccupied to notice how eagerly she scrutinised

his face. It told her little. His cheeks were flushed, his eyes suffused.

"Passingham has been kind enough to invite me for your cruise," he said.

"Are you able to come?" she asked steadily.

"Oh, yes —"

"I am very pleased," she answered.

Digby looked along the deck.

"May I see Zelie?" he asked.

"She is in the saloon. Can you find your way?"

"I think so."

Passingham stepped forward, and Cecily took his arm. She pressed it hard, as Digby went to Zelie.